

**questions and performatives -
communities of inquiry as conventional contexts**

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abstract

'Philosophy for Children', firstly proposed by M. Lipman and crucially developed with the contribution of A. M. Sharp, aims to nourish both critical thinking and argumentative ability of participants, enhancing their dialogical disposition and stimulating their inclusive and respectful attitude. The model conceives of children as a crucial resource for social development, and at the same time, for philosophical inquiry: since children's thought is supposed to be free from undisputable dogmas and theories that predominate adults' views, their questions or arguments about philosophical issues can shed new light on them, or even underline some contradictions of the adult-like society, that in standard conditions are unconsciously disregarded. In brief then, the philosophical background of P4C pushes for an in-practice philosophy, highlighting the value of critical thinking and ambitious questioning against a docile acceptance of well-established theories (and social practices). Shared and inclusive dialogical dynamics are then considered as a meaning of enhancing both social development and the level of research. Yet, the undervaluation of some dangers hiding in the maze of the dialogical activity could mislead models such as P4C from their own goals. In this paper, resulting from the observation of several P4C sessions, I face one of these possible risks, by focusing on the question-choosing process. I argue that, although they are supposed to be cross-sections of social environments, communities of inquiry as defined by Lipman are conventional contexts, where participants take part into a procedure: the sentences pronounced within the community possess a high performative value. According to the model, a jointly-agreed question is the starting point for the following discussion, the nature of which rests on several factors: the epistemic openness of such starting question is one of them. At this stage (viz. during the questioning activity), regardless of the explicit purpose of the model of doing so, sometimes social and cultural differences among participants are not completely erased. Hence, in heterogenous communities, the process of moving from the agenda to discussion hides some more difficulties for the facilitator. In such circumstances, the questioning activity is often the premise for a less fruitful discussion. I therefore propose a methodological integration to the standard P4C model, as an additional meaning to allow the facilitator to grant both participation and epistemic openness, even in heterogeneous communities.

keywords: communities of inquiry; questions; dialogue dynamics; performative language

**preguntas y performatividad -
comunidades de investigação como contextos convencionales**

resumen

El programa "Filosofía para Niños", inicialmente propuesto por M. Lipman, y desarrollado con la contribución determinante de A. M. Sharp, busca desarrollar tanto el pensamiento

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crítico como la capacidad argumentativa de los participantes, mejorando su disposición dialógica y estimulando su actitud inclusiva y respetuosa. El modelo concibe al niño como un recurso crucial para el desarrollo social y, al mismo tiempo, para la investigación filosófica: como el pensamiento de los niños está supuestamente libre de dogmas y teorías irrefutables que predominan en las visiones adultas, sus preguntas o argumentos acerca de cuestiones filosóficas pueden arrojar una nueva luz sobre ellas, o inclusive, dejar en evidencia algunas contradicciones de la sociedad adulta, que en condiciones normales son inconscientemente desconsideradas. En resumen, P4C (*Philosophy for Children*) defiende una filosofía práctica, que destaca el valor del pensamiento crítico y cuestionamiento que ambiciona oponerse a una aceptación dócil de teorías (y prácticas sociales) consolidadas. Dinámicas dialógicas compartidas e inclusivas son consideradas como un medio para mejorar tanto el desarrollo social como el nivel de indagación. Sin embargo, subestimar algunos peligros escondidos en la complejidad de la actividad dialógica podría desviar modelos como el de P4C de sus propios objetivos. En el presente artículo, a partir de la observación de varias sesiones de P4C, abordo uno de esos posibles riesgos, concentrándome en el proceso de selección de preguntas. Argumento que, aunque sean supuestos recortes de la sociedad, las comunidades de investigación definidas por Lipman son contextos regidos por convenciones, en los que los integrantes participan de un procedimiento: las sentencias pronunciadas dentro de la comunidad poseen un alto valor performativo. De acuerdo con el modelo, una cuestión escogida colectivamente es el punto de partida de la discusión, cuya naturaleza depende de varios factores: la apertura epistémica de la pregunta inicial es una de ellas. En esta fase (a saber, durante la actividad de cuestionamiento), independientemente de una intención explícita, en algunos casos, las diferencias sociales y culturales entre los participantes no son completamente eliminadas. Así, en las comunidades de investigación heterogéneas, el proceso de pasar de la elección de la pregunta a la discusión planeada esconde algunas dificultades para el facilitador. En tales circunstancias, la actividad cuestionadora es frecuentemente la premisa de una discusión menos provechosa. Propongo, por lo tanto, una inclusión metodológica al modelo P4C, como un medio adicional para posibilitar que el facilitador promueva tanto la participación como la apertura epistémica, incluso en comunidades heterogéneas.

palabras clave: comunidades de investigación; preguntas; dinámica de diálogo; lenguaje performativo

perguntas e performatividades - comunidades de investigação como contextos convencionais

resumo

"Filosofia para Crianças", primeiramente proposto por M. Lipman, e desenvolvido de maneira determinante com a contribuição de A. M. Sharp, visa nutrir tanto o pensamento crítico quanto a capacidade argumentativa dos participantes, aprimorando sua disposição dialógica e estimulando sua atitude inclusiva e respeitosa. O modelo concebe a criança como um recurso crucial para o desenvolvimento social e, ao mesmo tempo, para a investigação filosófica: como o pensamento das crianças é supostamente isento de dogmas e teorias incontestáveis que predominam nas visões dos adultos, suas perguntas ou argumentos acerca de questões filosóficas podem lançar nova luz sobre elas, ou mesmo evidenciar algumas contradições da sociedade adulta, que em condições normais são inconscientemente desconsideradas. Em resumo, então, o pano de fundo filosófico do P4C (*Philosophy for Children*) defende uma filosofia prática, destacando o valor do pensamento crítico e questionamento ambicioso contra uma aceitação dócil de teorias (e práticas sociais) consolidadas. Dinâmicas dialógicas compartilhadas e inclusivas são então consideradas como um meio para melhorar tanto o desenvolvimento social quanto o nível de pesquisa.

No entanto, subestimar alguns perigos escondidos no emaranhado da atividade dialógica poderia desviar modelos como o P4C de seus próprios objetivos. Neste artigo, a partir da observação de várias sessões do P4C, enfrento um desses possíveis riscos, concentrando-me no processo de escolha de perguntas. Argumento que, embora sejam supostamente recortes da sociedade, as comunidades de investigação definidas por Lipman são contextos regidos por convenções, em que os integrantes participam de um procedimento: as sentenças pronunciadas dentro da comunidade possuem um alto valor performativo. De acordo com o modelo, uma questão combinada é o ponto de partida para a discussão, cuja natureza depende de vários fatores: a abertura epistêmica da questão inicial é uma delas. Nesta fase (a saber, durante a atividade de questionamento), independentemente de uma intenção explícita, em alguns casos, as diferenças sociais e culturais entre os participantes não são completamente eliminadas. Assim, em comunidades de investigação heterogêneas, o processo de passar da escolha da questão para a discussão planejada esconde algumas dificuldades para o facilitador. Em tais circunstâncias, a atividade questionadora é frequentemente a premissa de uma discussão menos proveitosa. Proponho, portanto, uma inclusão metodológica ao modelo padrão P4C, como um meio adicional para possibilitar que o facilitador promova tanto a participação quanto a abertura epistêmica, mesmo em comunidades heterogêneas.

palavras-chave: comunidades de investigação; perguntas; dinâmica de diálogo; linguagem performativa

questions and performatives -
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The terms 'childhood' and 'infancy' have slightly different meanings in English. Indeed, while the first broadly refers to the early life of a human being; the latter describes a more specific age, namely the early youth in which the baby is not yet able to pronounce any words. In English, the acquisition of the ability to speak is the bound of a distinction between two different life stages. 'Infancy' derives from Latin ('*infans*' = non-speaker) but oddly, both Latin and Romance languages lack an equivalent of the term 'childhood'. So, we have only '*infanzia*', '*enfance*', '*infanzia*' and so on and so forth. Linguistically speaking, within Romance languages, the child keeps being a 'non-speaker' until he will finally become an adult (i.e. a speaker). From this peculiarity, I assume that 'being a non-speaker' did not refer to the physical impossibility of performing the act of speaking (as it is in English), it rather referred to an alleged unsuitableness of the child to do so, to do it expressing appropriate meanings. This suggestion seems to be supported by the fact that Romance languages distinguish between 'childhood' and 'infancy' by recurring to the adjective 'early': so, there is infancy (read 'childhood' in English) and early infancy (read 'infancy'). Differences between these life stages are biological (as the child is growing up), anthropological and social, yet (at least linguistically) the status of being an inappropriate speaker persists. Since classic antiquity, the child has been considered as a deficient being, an adult in progress². Consequently, childhood has been excluded from culture for long. Children were ignored as subjects, while their education was forced and mnemonical. From Homer to medieval hagiographies, the child constantly confronted himself with adult moral principles and his main task was that of imitating adults, saints and heroes at his best. 'As early as the 15th century "courtesy books", such as *The Babies' Book*, provided children with instructions on behavior' (DRABBLE, 2006). Books written for children in the 17th century were 'sternly moralistic'. The rise of educational tools focused on children's needs was simply neglected. Only in the eighteenth century, together with a naïve taste for fairy tales and magics, works designed to attract and please children started to appear. As is known, he was Perrault who spread out literature for childhood with his "*Histoires ou contes du temp passé*"³. Fastly, books like "*Gulliver's Travels*" and others, although not directly written for children, encountered children's taste, engaging them into a new conscious activity. This new light, however, had few follow up. The imaginary freedom of fairy tales and the exotic taste of adventure books were gradually abandoned in favour of the more austere spirit brought by the positive belief in science and by the moral, religious and patriotic passion of romanticism. In the nineteenth century, several works expressly directed to childhood have been written, but they were didactic, and merely devoted to an individual which was far from being a person and still considered as unable to say something worthy. Then, on an *ad hoc* basis, the value of the child's thought has been

² Different views about childhood can be found in Plato (*Laws*) and Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria*).

³ Perrault was translated into English in 1729.

(and sometimes still is) rejected. Very likely, as W. Kohan puts it, there are two ways in which this rejection can take place (KOHAN, 2006)⁴:

- 1) by endorsing theories according to which the child lacks physiological or intellectual requirements for a noticeable thinking capacity (namely, his thought processes are inevitably childish)
- 2) by ignoring his thinking capacity and imposing to the child a pre-packaged model.

Against both these attitudes, originally influenced by the enlightenment, a different approach emerged. Indeed, the rise of a systematic inquiry about childhood is due to Rousseau⁵. He argued that we should inquire what a child is in himself, and hence that pretending the child to be an adult is worthless. In other words, a child would be already a subject, before showing adult-like skills.

Consequently, the child should be at the core of the educational system and educational processes should be shaped on childhood, rather than coerce children in adhere to the system. So, in the path of John Locke, who had claimed that rarely someone learns the art of good reasoning by studying the rules that pretend to teach that art (LOCKE, 1964), the interest about childhood became twofold: on the one hand, researches focused on the role of childhood in the building-process of human thought, and on the other hand new methods to nourish children's reasoning-skills became necessary. Within the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these conclusions led research to focus on the practical problem of thinking about a school built in accordance with children. Scholars and researchers such as Montessori, Dewey, Decroly and many others, attempted to propose models of new schools inspired by principles such as freedom, auto-education, self-expression and pedagogical curricula based on children's needs. Yet, many educationalists were still constrained to affirm that "between adults and children there should be a quantitative and qualitative difference in the notions to be learnt [...] but as about the method of teaching them, there is not a way of thinking rightly for children and a different one for adults [...] Of all parts of education, method is the hardest to renew. Our elementary school resemble factories where we teach children to describe how to do something instead of teaching how to do it." (GABELLI, 1999 [1880])⁶. Nowadays, the situation differs less than expected, as we often face the issue of a school which is not child-oriented. Among those willing to conceive that children do have something worthy to say, one of the contemporary attempts to provide a different pedagogical tool, is the Philosophy for Children and Philosophy for Communities (= P4C with adults) model, firstly proposed by M. Lipman and crucially developed with the contribution of A. M. Sharp. Starting from a pragmatist standpoint and directly relating to Dewey and Vygotsky's works, the model aims to nourish, through its community of inquiry sessions, both critical thinking and argumentative ability of participants, enhancing their dialogical disposition and

⁴ On the same matter, see also (DE VITA, 2014).

⁵ As an example: ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques. *Emile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.

⁶ Gabelli is one of the several sources that could be cited in this respect; it has been picked-up, among others, for explanatory reasons. Translation from Italian is mine.

stimulating their inclusive and respectful attitude. Philosophical inquiry is a social practice (aspiring to social development) that takes place through justification and validation of beliefs, hypotheses, ideas and values (STRIANO, 2010). As into Socratic dialogues, P4C re-shapes traditional philosophical problems into logic and linguistic issues, highlighting the crucial role played by language in building the world of thought (DE VITA, 2014). Through dialogue, children are supposed to express individual truths, mixing them until the acquisition of a new truth, shared and supported by argumentation (DE VITA, 2014). Thus, in this respect, the main goals of a community of inquiry are twofold:

- 1) promoting an intersubjective way of reasoning and developing democratic attitudes: a good community aims to train its participants to consider different perspectives, respect others and include everybody into discussion. This attitude is not just an ethical advice, but a way to enrich a shared view about a philosophical issue. Indeed, the idea promoted by P4C is that collective rationality overwhelms the single perspective view.
- 2) enhancing conceptual tools and research strategies of the subject as well as enriching is critical-argumentative skills. According to P4C, the individual should participate into collective discussion, bringing his doubt about mainstream views, addressing his own research and daring his independent answers.

Predominate adults' views, their questions or arguments about philosophical issues can shed new light on them, or even underline some contradictions of the adult-like society, that in standard conditions are unconsciously disregarded. In brief then, the philosophical background of P4C pushes for an in-practice philosophy, highlighting the value of critical thinking and ambitious questioning against a docile acceptance of well-established theories (and social practices). Shared and inclusive dialogical dynamics are then considered as a meaning of enhancing both social development and the level of research. This is a commendable goal that seems to rest on conceivable assumptions. Yet, the undervaluation of some dangers hiding in the maze of the dialogical activity could mislead models such as P4C from their own goals. In this paper, resulting from the observation of several P4C sessions⁷ (with participants coming from a very wide range of social, financial and cultural backgrounds), I face one of these possible risks, by focusing on the question-choosing process. I argue that, although they are supposed to be cross-sections of social environments, communities of inquiry as defined by Lipman are conventional contexts, where participants take part into a procedure: the sentences pronounced within the community possess a high performative value. As is known, among the various possible topics of discussion raised by the community about the text, participants individuate the one with the largest consensus (not only through voting,

⁷ Data collection started in 2015 during the course 'The curriculum of the Philosophy for Children as an educational project. Theoretical and methodological aspects' at the Federico II University - Naples. Within the six months training, participants have been building adult communities on a weekly base. This work refers also to eight Philosophy for Children sessions observed afterwards at the elementary school 'I.C.9° Circolo Cuoco-Schipa' - Naples. Further field tests have been made with the volunteered participation of some students at Panthéon-Sorbonne University - Paris (fall term - 2016).

but often in different and more nuanced and creative ways), framing it into a question.

The jointly-agreed question is the starting point for the following discussion, the nature of which rests on several factors: the epistemic openness of such starting question is one of them. At this stage (viz. during the questioning activity), regardless of the explicit purpose of the model of doing so, sometimes social and cultural differences among participants are not completely erased within heterogeneous (intercultural or multicultural or related to social asymmetries etc.) communities of inquiry⁸. Indeed, the fact that (as Lipman claims) philosophical problems are generated by empirical needs and products of philosophical inquiry should be returned to the context of actual experience, does not imply there are no truths to learn, nor definitions to refer to. Philosophy is an attempt to put the peculiarity of the single experience apart, as well as language vagueness, to tend to a certain relation with truth, objectivity and universality. In this respect, then, preceding experience can foster the disposition of an individual towards a philosophical relation to a fact, this affecting his questioning-activity (viz. often his questions will be philosophically pregnant). Similarly, preceding experiences of different nature can produce different (and sometimes opposite) results. Let us pick a borderline example: claiming that philosophy is a peculiar relation to a fact (i.e. a disposition) rather than a content-laden philosophical account, is a content-laden account itself, that somewhat requires a preceding mastery of philosophical concepts. According to the model, every individual should share his skills to foster dialogue and others' involvement. Yet, in heterogeneous communities, sometimes this is not the case and the process of moving from the agenda to discussion hides some more difficulties for the facilitator. In such circumstances, the questioning activity is often the premise for a less fruitful discussion. I hence propose a methodological integration to the standard P4C model, as an additional meaning to allow the facilitator to grant both participation and epistemic openness, even in heterogeneous communities.

communities of inquiry as conventional contexts

Lipman applied the expression 'community of inquiry', usually referred to scholars involved in a debate within a shared research field, to classrooms and groups. In doing so, he also reframed the very notion of 'inquiry' in a way which distinguishes his perspective from both Peirce's and Dewey's. As he conceived of it, communities of inquiry are working groups within which participants address the community to share their feelings, thoughts and critics about a jointly-chosen topic, aiming at a product of discussion (LIPMAN, 2003). This practice is supposed to "make a real and significant difference in educational contexts" (STRIANO, 2010) and its explicit goal is that of developing social progress by improving individuals. Participants, accustomed to adopting participative patterns, social interaction and critical thinking within the community, will implement the same attitude outside it.

⁸ I assume social and cultural heterogeneity as a potential threat to participation. More educated participants are likely able to act as epistemic agents within the community. At times, participants possessing socially/culturally deprived backgrounds can face difficulties and being excluded because of group dynamics.

This is the strategy adopted by P4C to abide by its idea that products of philosophical inquiry should be returned to the context of actual experience. Yet, group discussions are usually supposed to be representations of everyday interactions, where the hierarchical relations between adults and children⁹ are erased. Within the community, participants would also be free from social constraint. In both heterogeneous and homogeneous communities what is necessary to foster in the first instance (viz. at the beginning of a community-building process) is to somehow deconstruct certainties (regarding the self, the other, the group etc.) which are normally taken for granted. Yet, group dynamics, hierarchical relations and social status could sometimes make this deconstruction more difficult than expected. Indeed, P4C refers to contexts of actual experience, precisely because, within actual experience, hierarchical relations do exist (adult vs child; educated vs less educated people, and so on and so forth). To erase them is the final goal of the model, not its starting point. Within the community of inquiry, participants commit to a public procedure that aims to lessen those hierarchical relations. By doing so, P4C creates a conventional context where one's background should be put apart. Such a procedure is supposed to provide the model of a possible world, namely the model of an inclusive society that pursues critical and inclusive research. The difference is slight, yet not unimportant. Indeed, rather than a neutral medium of communication, social speech and dialogue is inherently value laden (VADEBONCOEUR; ALKOUATLI; AMINI, 2015). Vygotsky, to whom P4C refers, emphasised the importance of the child's cultural and social context as a source of guidance and support for learning. "Originally, for a child, speech represents a mean of communication between people [...] in its social ride. But gradually a child learns how to use speech to serve himself, his internal processes" (VYGOTSKY, 1935 [1994]). The child progressively internalises more sophisticated intellectual tools modelled on, or taught by others (HEDAYATI; GHAEDI 2009). Hence, he who received more sophisticated inputs, will bring his expertise within the community putting himself in charge, even unwittingly. 'Public opinions' articulated in groups do not necessarily correspond with actual, private opinions because of the group processes and the social influence on more passive members by the leaders (ASCH, 1940) (SHERIF, 1935)¹⁰. Hierarchical relations and participants' content-laden backgrounds do emerge within the community¹¹. What the conventional procedure asks for, is doing an effort to put them apart. The naïve assumption that communities represent actual social settings where hierarchical relations are erased, can only mislead the model from his goal of lessening them. In homogenous communities, we are entitled to expect participants to be willing (and possess the self-confidence) to fulfil the role provided for them by conventional procedure. Namely, they will likely participate into discussion to expand its epistemic openness, promote others' involvement, equally consider every claim, as, if not explicitly asking for it, the facilitator makes a quite evident effort towards this direction (which is easily recognised by participants). Differently, in heterogeneous communities¹²,

⁹ Similarly, within adult communities, the model aims to erase social differences.

¹⁰ Cited in (BILLMANN-MAHECHA, 2005).

¹¹ I sketch here dangers that can arise with a speech community – dangers that can arise when there are differences of status, with or without cultural heterogeneity. However, these dangers are strengthened by the presence of the latter.

¹² Where participants possess radically different social, educational and cultural backgrounds.

the weight of some members' speech can put them in charge as discussion leaders. Thus, other members do not participate into communities as epistemic agents. They give up their role within the conventional procedures, and they come across uninterested or participate into discussion by passively endorsing leaders' views, disregarding their own. They withdraw from discussion: precisely what P4C aims to prevent. "This is particularly significant and relevant in deprived social contexts, where cultural and social barriers are extremely strong and powerful" (STRIANO, 2010).

To avoid this risk, it is necessary to recognise

- 1) that P4C communities of inquiry are conventional contexts whose final goal is that of promoting critical thinking and shared knowledge. According to the procedure, participants act as epistemic agents to notice the advantages of a possible world, where social processes are grounded in inclusive presuppositions and research is free from hierarchical social relations. However, these relations still fall back into communities of inquiry.
- 2) Although participants are expected to act as epistemic agents and to ask freely in accordance with their feelings, individual backgrounds underline their questioning activity. Questions disclose educational and social differences among participants. Participants perceive the content-laden weight of some claims as well as the weakness of others: hierarchical relations emerge. Sometimes, this prevents their inclusion into the dialogical activity.

community of inquiry and performative utterances

In his 'Thinking in Education' (2003), Lipman explicitly discusses Austin's speech act theory (AUSTIN, 1975). Regardless of the nature of this relationship (sometimes overlooked, some other times, underestimated), it would be hard to deny that within a community of inquiry, sentences pronounced by participants possess a performative power as they affect the nature of discussion. Austin famously argued that within languages, some utterances

- do not respond to truth conditions
- do not contain modal expressions
- are not mere 'non-sense'

These utterances always entail some conventional consequences; namely, by pronouncing them, we perform determined actions with determined consequences. Austin defines them as 'performative utterances'¹³. Actions cannot be true or false: they can be performed or not. Or, they can be performed in a good (or bad) way depending on the appropriateness of the circumstances in which they have been performed. The same applies to performative utterances. Two reasons seem to

¹³ Austin uses the distinction between performative and constative utterances to introduce a general account of language as an action. He came to replace the performative/constative dichotomy by a theory of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Per this view, every utterance is performative. Proposing a question, asking a question, and answering a question are all different illocutionary acts, governed by different felicity conditions.

suggest that sentences pronounced by participants within a community can be considered as performatives:

- 1) According to the conventional procedure of P4C, participants cannot declare true (or false) a sentence pronounced by others. Acting as an epistemic agent, one should still take others' hypothesis into consideration, even when arguing in favour of a different claim
- 2) Every sentence shapes the following epistemic paths: it acts on the community

Moreover, according to Austin, there are no truth conditions for actions and performative utterances (which are actions indeed). There are only two conditions ('happiness conditions'), according to which an act is performed or not, and is performed in a good (or bad) way.

- Conventional conditions: performative utterances respond to certain conventional contexts, otherwise they are useless
- Intentional conditions: they must be sincere

If we violate the convention imposed by circumstances, our action is void (ex. a barman cannot marry me and my girlfriend). Differently, in the latter case the action is pursued (all conventional procedures have been respected) yet, me being insincere, my action has not been performed in the best way (ex. I marry my wife in appropriate circumstances, yet I do not love her). Both these conditions seem to apply very well to communities of inquiry. Often sentences pronounced within the community would not seem appropriate outside of it nor they would not shape reality in any way. Let us imagine we are participating in a community where discussion flew on the nature of culture. Everybody is trying to define what culture is or should be. Statements like '*I think culture is...*' would seem inappropriate to many contexts outside the community, where we use the term 'culture', hoping for an at least partial agreement on the definition of what culture is. Furthermore, sentences within the community should always be sincere. If my speech is insincere, models' procedure is fulfilled as I pronounce sentences who leave open room to further discussion and involve others (I am acting on the community). Yet, the community does not reach its goals: I do not engage into discussion and I remain sure about my individual opinions disregarding others'. My action on the community is performed in a bad way, so it is useless. As well as the action P4C aimed to do on reality.

community of inquiry and questions

While philosophers have always striven for answers and their questioning activity has always been the driving force of their inquiries; nowadays questioning is not considered an important feature of education (MOHR LONE, 2011). The schooling system focuses its attention on other issues (i.e. acquisition of skills and competences) and hence, "[children] learn that having a question means that there is something they should have already grasped but have not" (MOHR LONE, 2011). Lipman instead claimed that "questioning is the leading edge of inquiry" (LIPMAN, 2009) and, recognising that philosophy has always had some kind of specificity in this regard, he built the P4C proposal to give back to children their right to ask

unanswerable questions. According to his proposal, both asking and responding are necessary skills to engage participants in a fruitful dialogue. Being at ease in asking questions directly relates with critical thinking: indeed, raising doubts about a theory involves a non-submissive approach to knowledge. Precisely to abide by this assumption, a P4C session mostly unfold around question-making (see for instance “Thinking in Education”, 2003, especially pp. 94-103). However, also receiving children’s questions and accepting them as a crucial part of the joint inquiry is everything but a mere procedural step (the result of which can be taken for granted). It rather is one of the crucial aspects that, along with others¹⁴, concurs in modifying the nature of group discussions. That is, the building of a dialogical community of inquiry depends, among other factors, on the nature and quality of questions individuated by participants. Narrow-minded starting questions get the effort of the facilitator to engage participants into epistemically open discussions, more complicated (or, sometimes, ineffectual). Participants who are aware of their epistemic role would ask closed questions hardly-ever¹⁵. On the contrary, the observation of several heterogeneous communities demonstrated that closed questions are more frequent in such contexts, this often undermining the quality of dialogue, regardless of the efforts of the facilitator. The following analysis of some difficulties related to dialogical dynamics of questioning and answering, refers to the sole discourse. On the basis of Lipman and Sharp’s proposal, however, there are reasons to believe that also non-discursive (albeit performative) aspects of experience (related to corporeality, the setting of discussion etc.) play a role in fostering inclusion (or exclusion). In the case I analyse hereby, however, non-discursive strategies of inclusion resulted into failures.

some examples

Lipman himself provided a compelling theory of *good dialogues* (LIPMAN, 2003)¹⁶. Per his view, when involved in good dialogues, speakers

- 1) show both critical and creative thinking
- 2) care about others’ feelings and inclusion
- 3) make claims supported by evidences
- 4) use the ideas of others as a starting point to further inquiries
- 5) make the concepts they use clear
- 6) make judgments that enrich the lives we have yet to live

Clearly, Lipman himself highlighted the importance of epistemic openness. Yet, this is not a fixed value: epistemic openness changes under different conditions. In unfavourable situations it is difficult to enrich the quality of the dialogue as it is, in part, dependent upon the features of the community. Here are some (anonymised)

¹⁴ The role played by the facilitator, the quality of the question, the way in which the topic of discussion is chosen (which may not only be through voting a question), the discussion plan, the interpersonal dynamics of participants, etc.

¹⁵ In actual circumstances a group of like-minded children do ask one another closed questions, let us say in arithmetic. Yet, if required by the context (as in the case of a P4C session), they can quite easily avoid these questions on purpose.

¹⁶ Cited in (VADEBONCOEUR; ALKOUATLI; AMINI, 2015)

scenarios from real, heterogeneous communities of inquiry. In every case, standard procedures fail to include all participants into dialogue. Before moving on, however, it could be necessary to state that a community is meant to be a work in progress: every considered community of inquiry disclosed increasing improvements in the quality of dialogue. But still along the path, some sessions (both with novice and long-term communities) kept turning out to be obtruded. Following examples frame difficulties within single sessions occurred in long-term communities. All cases refer to the novel 'Christian'¹⁷. For explanatory reasons, I just quote the very first lines of the episode to which questions referred.

"Today was my first day. When I got to school, I felt the way my fish must have felt when I brought it to stay in my friend Atachi's fishbowl while I'm here, in Spain."

case i - trivial questions

A: 'Is it right having fishes in bowls?'

B: 'Why is he from Spain?'

C: 'What is it like to be a fish?'

Questions asked by A and C are evidently more open epistemically than the one asked by B. The facilitator has two options:

- 1) He/she intervenes, somewhat encouraging A and C's questions
- 2) He/she does not intervene.

Possible following scenarios

- Option 1: community, still considering the facilitator as the one in charge, follows his advices. A's question is the chosen one and C's question has been discussed for long (or vice versa). B's question received little attention. B feels as if his question was inappropriate. In some cases, he could feel excluded and withdraw from discussion¹⁸.
- Option 2: most participants are not able to focus on epistemic openness. B's question is the chosen topic. Following discussions could be a clash of claims of sort, with little argumentation. Discussion doesn't meet Lipman's criteria.

¹⁷ The quote is taken from Episode 1 of the novel 'Christian'. It is part of the volume 'Hamadi & Christian' by Adolfo Agúndez Rodríguez, Ignacio García Pedraza, Juan Carlos Lago Bornstein, Lucia Sainz Benito. The texts included in this volume are the products of the EU project PEACE - Philosophical Enquiry Advancing Cosmopolitan Engagement and they can be retrieved online at www.peace.tugraz.at. Date of retrieval September the 30th, 2017.

¹⁸ This (as well as the following cases) is supposed to be a real possibility, yet not necessary. One might suppose that there are ways of selecting one question rather than another without this being experienced as a put-down by whoever proposed the other question (though it would indeed be discouraging if someone *regularly* found his or her questions declined). My proposal is supposed to provide an additional tool to be used when the 'facilitator' notice put-downs, regular exclusions and so on.

case ii – questions requiring background knowledge

Chosen Question: ‘Should we endorse positive liberty? Or rather negative liberty?’

One of the participants, inspired by the fish into a fishbowl example, asked this question. Few participants understood his reference to a well-established philosophical debate¹⁹ and showed their appreciation for a very promising question. Other members of the community lack a philosophical background and they are used to neither ‘positive’ nor ‘negative’ accounts of liberty. Some of them feel unattracted by a question they cannot understand, some others are fascinated by its cleverness.

Possible following scenarios:

- Participants possessing a philosophical background criticise both account of liberty. They resort to their competences and make references to well-established arguments. The inquiry is deep and accurate yet, very likely, other members feel as unable to join the discussion. They think it is about something they do not really know, or something they lack an appropriate language to speak about. Hence, they withdraw from discussion.
- Discussion starts when participant Ω , who does not possess any philosophical education, makes a claim by using the terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ according to their common-sense meanings. Philosophically educated members disregard (or ignore) Ω ’s claim, forcing discussion into philosophical patterns. Ω notices how others use ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ in a specialised meaning. He/she conceives of himself lacking some appropriate skills; he/she feels unsuitable to the circumstance. The same can also apply to other participants who silently shared the feeling of Ω . Likely, this will affect their participation.

case iii – disagreements

A: ‘I think Ω question is interesting’

B: ‘Me too.’

C: ‘Not at all, it is so trivial. I prefer Φ question!’

D: ‘Yes, C is right!’

Two or more questions divide participants. Efforts by the facilitator cannot solve the deadlock. Because of group dynamics such as relationship and rivalries between participants, they do not intend to cooperate in any way.

Possible following scenarios

- The facilitator keeps trying to solve the situation by encouraging argumentation. His efforts are useless. The session ends but participants still disagree.
- The facilitator proposes a non-argumentative method to solve the deadlock (voting, drawing lots etc.). Discussion starts with the losing group showing its

¹⁹ As an example: BERLIN, I. *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

questions and performatives - communities of inquiry as conventional contexts

lack of interest or participating polemically. The dialogue doesn't meet Lipman's criteria

case iv - blunders

Question asked by Ω unfolds a mistaken use of a term he had found into the text.

Possible following scenario

- His/her question is weak. Participants disregard it, and they choose a different question. Ω feels shy and inhibited because of his blunder. Very likely, this feeling will influence his/her participation.

a methodological proposal

All examples unfold as, during the question-choosing process, when someone refuse (or merely is unable for reasons of sort) to abide by the role ascribed to him by conventional procedure, his utterances influence the following discussion. The role played in this regard by the facilitator in helping the community achieve inclusion is of paramount importance and is indeed complex. However, it is not my purpose to analyse it here. Rather, the following methodological innovation has to be considered as an integration: an additional, possible device or strategy facilitators can adopt²⁰ when facilitating with complicated/deprived communities. The proposal aims to

- avoid cases such as those I mentioned
- assuring the community an epistemically open and fruitful question, allowing participants to ask freely, by appealing to their intellectual skills as well as their emotions. A short description of the proposal (in reference to the same piece of text) comes after:

"Today was my first day. When I got to school, I felt the way my fish must have felt when I brought it to stay in my friend Atauchi's fishbowl while I'm here, in Spain."

After reading the text, participants are supposed to identify just one word. No matter if they recur to emotions or intellectual reasoning. They can choose a word that seems crucial to them, the one they mostly like, the one that reminds their beautiful memories etc.

- A: 'Freedom'
- B: 'Spain'
- C: 'Education'
- D: 'Empathy'

20 Other strategies may rely on the creativity of the facilitator, on his/her capacity to 'improvise' on specific circumstances (Santi and Oliverio 2012).

Hence, the facilitator asks participants to choose one of the words, no matter how. They can either vote or choose a word as it had been chosen by several participants, they can reach an agreement by sharing their feelings about the words etc. Since argumentations and cleverness are not involved into the process, in every case nobody feels excluded nor discredited. A word is not a question, it does not imply precise presuppositions: pronouncing a word is not arguing. Moreover, a mere word leaves open room to several interpretations²¹ and the word-choosing process does not involve emotional risks for participants. When the jointly-agreed word has been identified, the facilitator introduces three possible epistemic paths to be matched with it.

What? Why? How?

Again, no matter how participants reach an agreement: the choice does not involve their social and intellectual backgrounds. So, supposing participants choose 'freedom', possible questions would be

'What [is] freedom?' 'Why freedom?' 'How [can one be] free?'

None of them is epistemically closed²². Likely, the method saved the community from the emergency of hierarchical relations, during the question-choosing process. Moreover, every word could have been chosen: indeed, with 'Spain' (apparently less promising than 'freedom'), possible questions²³ would have been

'What [is] Spain?' 'Why Spain?' 'How [we had] Spain?'

This process, by framing hierarchical relations into a non-argumentative questioning process, could also assure open questions to communities, shaping the following discussion with good premises.

conclusion

To preserve the educational role and goals of models such as P4C, group dynamics cannot be defined by principle. Like it or not, hierarchical relations do emerge within communities, as they are present everywhere within contemporary society. To nourish critical thinking and lessen them, we built models such as P4C. Yet, occasionally practice reveals their inefficacy: in many cases this depends on how

²¹ The proposed method also refers to Vygotsky's views about concept formation (VYGOTSKY, 1986). Participants indeed should synthesize their thoughts and feelings into one representative word. They are asked to pursue backwards the path they pursued from thinking in complexes to thinking in concepts.

²² 'How can one be free?' differs from 'what is freedom?' very slightly. More clearly distinct, though related, would be 'How can one *become* free? However, since the proposal is supposed to assure inclusion and epistemic openness during the questioning process, all the possibilities equally fit our purpose. As in the case of 'why freedom?' the oddity of the form 'how free?' does not threaten the epistemic fruitfulness of the task which participants will discuss.

²³ Again, all the 'Spain' questions seem bizarre. Yet, they all leaves room to several interpretations and encourage discussion.

the facilitator employs the model, say, dogmatically or unreflectively, rather than on the model *per se*. In some other cases, instead, difficulties could arise from social dynamics between participants. P4C builds up a conventional context, in which by principle social relations and backgrounds are supposed to be put apart. Yet, in complicated communities this happens to be more difficult than expected. Questions affect community's activity; in socially deprived contexts, they disclose differences which bring about someone's exclusion from dialogue. Educational tools should be constantly enriched with new procedures to face problems as such. The method I propose is intended to guarantee both the epistemic nature of the dialogue and actual inclusion of all participants during the question-choosing process. It is a way of avoiding that some members remain in a 'infant' (= non-speaking) position. Following discussions will be unpredictable and likely, different backgrounds can easily create discussion leaders *after* the question-choosing process. Knowledge possessed by educated participants should be shared as a tool of the whole community. This should happen voluntarily as P4C asks members to act as epistemic agents, yet as I tried to show for questions, it could be the case that in certain circumstances community's dynamics impede that. Thinking about new methods to enhance the degree of skills-sharing within communities during joint discussions, would be another fruitful path to pursue.

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