

QUESTIONS AND THE COMMUNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract:

Matthew Lipman wrote that “questioning is the leading edge of inquiry.” This reflects the primacy of the question in a community of philosophical inquiry. The heart of the transformative potential of philosophy for children is student engagement in a dialogue grounded in the questions that most appeal to the group and the collaborative attempt to construct meaning and cultivate deep understanding. The students’ responsibility for choosing the question to begin their discussion enhances the democratic nature of the community and highlights the preeminence within the inquiry of the issues that perplex the students. There is a significant relationship between having the children choose the question for discussion and the role of epistemological modesty – the acknowledgement that all members of the group, including the facilitator, are fallible and hold views that could end up being mistaken – in a community of philosophical inquiry. In order to encourage children to engage in what Lipman called “creative questioning,” it’s essential that we trust their judgment and support their cultivation of the inclination to question.

Keywords: questioning and inquiry; community of philosophical inquiry; choice of question(s); epistemological modesty; authentic conversation

Preguntas y la comunidad de investigación filosófica

Resumen:

Matthew Lipman escribió que el “preguntar es el filo más cortante de la investigación.” Esto refleja la primacía de la pregunta en una comunidad de investigación filosófica. El corazón del potencial transformativo de *filosofía para niños* es el compromiso del estudiante con un diálogo fundado en las preguntas que más llaman la atención del grupo y con el intento colaborativo de construir significado y cultivar una comprensión profunda. La responsabilidad de los estudiantes de elegir la pregunta para comenzar su discusión realza la naturaleza democrática de la comunidad y destaca la mayor importancia, dentro de la investigación, de las cuestiones que dejan perplejos a los estudiantes. Hay una relación significativa entre hacer que los niños elijan la pregunta para la discusión y el papel de la modestia epistemológica - el reconocimiento que todos los miembros del grupo, incluyendo el facilitador, son falibles y sostienen puntos de vista que al final pueden ser erróneos - en una comunidad de investigación filosófica. Para animar a los niños a comprometerse con lo que Lipman llamó “preguntar creativo,” es esencial que confiamos en su juicio y apoyemos su cultivo a la inclinación a preguntar.

Palabras claves: preguntar e investigar; comunidad de investigación filosófica; elección de pregunta(s); modestia epistemológica; conversación auténtica

Perguntas e a comunidade de investigação filosófica

Resumo:

Matthew Lipman escreveu que “perguntar é o fio mais cortante da investigação”. Isto reflete a primazia da pergunta na comunidade de investigação filosófica. O ponto central do potencial transformador da filosofia é o engajamento do estudante em um diálogo estabelecido pelas perguntas que mais apareceram no grupo e a tentativa colaborativa de construir sentidos e cultivar entendimento profundo. A responsabilidade dada aos alunos de escolherem a questão para começarem suas discussões destaca a natureza democrática da comunidade e sinaliza a existência, na investigação, de questões que deixam os estudantes perplexos. Existe uma relação significativa entre ter a questão escolhida pela criança para discussão e o papel da modéstia epistemológica – e o reconhecimento de que todos os membros do grupo, incluindo o facilitador, são falíveis e sustentam pontos de vista que podem ser errôneos no final – na comunidade de investigação filosófica. Para encorajarmos as crianças a se engajarem no que Lipman chamou de “questionamento criativo”, é essencial que possamos confiar em seus julgamentos e sustentar o cultivo das suas inclinações para fazerem perguntas.

Palavras-chave: questionar e investigar; comunidade de investigação filosófica; escolha de questão (ões); modéstia epistemológica; conversação autêntica

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Jana Mohr Lone

*The question puts doubt in our minds and doubt is the beginning of inquiry.*¹

Questions are central to learning and to philosophy. Philosophy emerged from questions, and the history of philosophy is essentially a history of questions building on questions. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once suggested that philosophy can be defined as "the art of asking the right questions."² In order to articulate a philosophical problem, analyze an argument, or understand an alternative view, we have to be able to formulate clear and relevant questions.

Moreover, the ability to construct good questions is indispensable for navigating one's way through contemporary life. Developing confidence and skill in questioning allows children to evaluate critically the constant flood of information that bombards them, gather what they need to make good decisions, and convey what gaps remain in their understanding of particular topics or situations. The more accomplished a child becomes at framing good questions, the more able he or she will be to think clearly and competently for herself.³

The art of questioning, however, is not considered an important feature of education. On the whole, public education actually seems to discourage questioning. When a teacher asks a question in a classroom, typically the teacher is not attempting to initiate a dialogue about the question or to demonstrate the value of questioning, but rather is seeking a specific answer from the students.

¹ Matthew Lipman, "Philosophy for Children: Some Assumptions and Implications," in *Children Philosophize Worldwide*, eds. Eva Marsal, Takara Dobashi and Barbara Weber (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 32.

² Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1955), 4.

³ Educator Tony Wagner recounts his several hundred conversations with business, non-profit, philanthropic, and education leaders about the core skills necessary for success in today's workplaces, and he notes that the ability to ask good questions was mentioned most frequently. Tony Wagner, *The Global Achievement Gap* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 1-17.

Students spend significant portions of their schooling, in fact, trying to ascertain the right answers to questions asked by teachers (whether aloud in class or on tests). Many teachers are themselves not particularly skilled at posing questions. Attend almost any staff meeting in a public school in the United States, and it's rapidly apparent that a substantial number of teachers lack confidence and practice asking questions. Often teachers see student questions as having the potential to undermine their authority, especially in the content-driven, teacher-centered traditional public school classroom.

Before school begins, almost all very young children are alive with questions; they seem to naturally apprehend this is the way to investigate and understand the world. Often adults try to provide answers to children's questions, and sometimes they dismiss them. Most children under the age of 7 or so are undeterred by adult dismissals, and persist in questioning. At some point, however, elementary school students absorb the message that questions are not particularly welcome in school. They learn that having a question means that there is something they should have already grasped but have not. Asking questions publicly broadcasts what they don't know, and this has the potential to be somewhat shameful, or at least embarrassing. And so they go silent. Walk into a sixth grade classroom, and it's obvious that students pose questions with a tentativeness absent in kindergarten.

Taking children's questions seriously is a crucial aspect of helping them to develop strong inquiry skills. This involves really listening to what children are asking. Adults often don't do this. But engaging children in a conversation about why they were puzzled and what led them to voice their questions is vital for helping children develop the ability to formulate and pose clear and articulate questions.

For philosophers, questions – and the relationships between various questions – are the bedrock of the discipline. In turn, philosophy is one of the most powerful disciplines for helping students learn how to ask good questions.

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Nowhere is this connection more evident than in philosophy for children classes. Here, children's questions determine what topics will be explored and the entire content of the inquiry.

Matthew Lipman's development of a detailed conception of the "community of inquiry" and practical strategies for converting a classroom into one was, in my view, his single greatest contribution to the field of pre-college philosophy. Promoting what he called a "reflective paradigm" of education, Lipman, following Dewey, saw education *as* inquiry (rather than viewing education as involving the teaching of the end products of inquiry), and contended that the appropriate model for classroom learning is the community of inquiry. Lipman's community of inquiry has the following characteristics: (1) the enterprise is based on mutual respect; (2) students build on one another's ideas and follow the argument where it leads; (3) it's expected that students will give reasons for their opinions; (4) students assist one another in drawing out inferences from what has been said; and (5) students endeavor to identify one another's assumptions.⁴

The community of inquiry can, of course, be used to explore any subject matter in the classroom.⁵ The special features of a community of *philosophical* inquiry involve the content (i.e. philosophical topics). The identification of a philosophical topic is not an uncontroversial matter, of course. Philosophical topics examine meanings, attempt to clarify concepts, and generally engage abstract questions that are not likely to be answered in any final way. This does not mean that philosophical topics involve questions without answers, but the

⁴ Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13-16.

⁵ See, for example, Maughn Gregory, "A Framework for Facilitating Classroom Dialogue," in *Children Philosophize Worldwide*, eds. Eva Marsal, Takara Dobashi and Barbara Weber (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 277-99, especially 278.

answers continue to be contestable, rather than final and settled.⁶ In a philosophy for children class, the students' questions shape the scope of the inquiry.

In a community of philosophical inquiry (CPI), the teacher's (or facilitator's) role is to guide the students in a dialogue that analyzes questions about philosophical issues or concepts that have been generated by the class. The following are what I take to be the four central features of a CPI:

1. The group is engaged in a structured, collaborative inquiry aimed at constructing meaning and acquiring understanding through the examination of philosophical questions or concepts of interest to the participants;
2. There is a consensus of "epistemological modesty:" an acknowledgement that all members of the group, including the facilitator, are fallible, and therefore hold views that could end up being mistaken;
3. The facilitator demonstrates a reticence about advocating his or her own philosophical views, and models a comfort with uncertainty, with the fact that there are no final and agreed-upon answers to most of the questions being explored by the CPI; and
4. The participants in a CPI refrain from using technical philosophical language or referring to the work of professional philosophers to construct their arguments. This is a way both of "leveling the playing field" between students with backgrounds in philosophy and those without any, and ensuring that that the group focuses on exploring the questions themselves and not the past or current history of the subject among philosophers.⁷

According to Lipman, the standard philosophy for children session, structured as a CPI, involves three main parts: a collaborative reading of a text, emergence of the questions the text raises for the students, and the discussion.⁸ Typically the facilitator of the session will read something to spark a philosophical experience (for Lipman, this would involve a reading of part of one of the books in the IAPC curriculum⁹), and then ask, basically, "What questions

⁶ A fuller discussion of what makes a question philosophical is beyond the scope of this paper. For a more extended treatment, see Jana Mohr Lone, "Philosophical Sensitivity" (unpublished paper currently being considered for publication in *Teaching Philosophy*).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lipman, "Philosophy for Children: Some Assumptions and Implications, op. cit., 31-33.

⁹ Pre-college philosophy educators utilize a wide and varied range of tools for inspiring philosophical discussion, including the IAPC curriculum, picture books, young adult literature, activities and games, film, music, visual art, etc.

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does this make you think about?" The students will then voice whatever is puzzling or interesting to them in the form of questions, which will be written on the board. At some point (when the space on the board runs out or at some other arbitrary moment), all of the questions for that session will be on the board.

Often a considerable part of a philosophy for children class will be spent listing the children's questions and then choosing which question(s) to discuss. It can be easy, sometimes, in the goal-driven society in which we live, to see this part of the session as a precursor to the real work, the philosophy discussion itself. Indeed, when I first began doing philosophy in pre-college classrooms, I was somewhat impatient about the time it took to get all the students' questions on the board and decide what to discuss.

I've come to understand, however, that the time spent helping students to formulate their own questions and ensuring that the discussion starts with those questions is in the end just as valuable as the time spent actually talking about them. For one thing, learning to articulate questions in a clear way, so that your question accurately describes whatever it is that's puzzling you, is an important skill that can only be developed with experience. Moreover, devoting time to listing and analyzing the students' questions lets the students know that asking questions is itself a valuable practice, quite apart from the discussion of them (let alone answering them).¹⁰

So much of primary and secondary education emphasizes knowing the answers, as if we had utter clarity about the meaning of most aspects of life.¹¹

¹⁰ Susan Gardner has written about the centrality of questioning in being able to understand the perspectives of others. Gardner, "Questioning to Hesitation, Rather than Hesitating to Question: A Pragmatic Hermeneutic Perspective on Educational Inquiry" (paper given at Mini-Conference on Philosophy for Children, American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meeting (San Diego, 2011).

¹¹ Educator John Holt noted the ways in which schools train children to be what he called "answered-centered" instead of "problem-centered" - they see a problem as an announcement that there is an answer to be found, often by prying it out of the teacher or by guessing, as opposed to a puzzle requiring reflection and analysis - because school "run on right answers." Holt, *How Children Fail* (New York: Merloyd Lawrence, 1982), especially 37-40 and 152-56.

But, as Lipman noted, it is when our knowledge of the world is revealed to be “ambiguous, equivocal, and mysterious,” that students are most inspired to think about the world.¹² Questions are the keys to articulating that ambiguity and mystery. Philosophy illuminates for children how vital questions are to examining the world in which we live and our place in it.

Once students have expressed their questions and the list on the board is complete, this list becomes the source of possible agenda items for the discussion that follows. Lipman emphasized the importance of ensuring that the questions for discussion are chosen by the children, and not by the facilitator.¹³ I've realized over years of working with young people the profound import of this idea. As Lipman noted:

This is a pivotal moment. If the teacher selects the questions, the students are likely to interpret that as a vestige of the old authoritarianism. Fortunately, a number of alternatives compatible with democracy are available. The order of questions to be discussed can be determined by voting, by lot, or by asking someone who didn't submit a question to make the necessary choice. In any event, this recognition of the elevated status of the question (and the reduced status of the answer) will help the students remember that questioning is the leading edge of inquiry; it opens the door to dialogue, to self-criticism, and to self-correction.¹⁴

When the children choose the question, it's an empowering experience for them. Especially in the early stages of the formation of a CPI, the fact that

¹² Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, op. cit., 14.

¹³ Some pre-college philosophy educators recommend organizing and categorizing the questions at this point. In his article “A Framework for Facilitating Classroom Dialogue,” for example, Maughn Gregory recommends organizing the questions into some order that will structure the inquiry, including looking for relationships among the questions. Gregory, op. cit., 282-84. Although I agree that it can be helpful to point out questions that seem very similar, or to clarify the meaning of particular questions, in general I think that spending very much time grouping and categorizing the questions is of less interest to students than choosing a question and moving into the discussion. Lipman had a similar perspective. See Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 157.

¹⁴ Lipman, “Philosophy for Children: Some Assumptions and Implications,” op. cit., 32.

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students select the questions that will initiate their discussions signals to them that there really is something different going on here, that the facilitator's agenda isn't determining the content of the inquiry – they are. *It's their questions that matter.*

The CPI facilitator's job is to be responsive to where the students want to take the discussion and to help ensure both the discussion's philosophical integrity and the intellectual safety of the CPI.¹⁵ Is there a potential conflict between these objectives? Catherine McCall, for example, notes that Lipman's approach, following Dewey, places the formation of a democratic community, not the philosophical depth of the discussion, at the center of philosophy for children sessions. Alternatively, in McCall's "Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI)" method, the primary focus is on the philosophical dialogue itself and not on the students.¹⁶ CoPI requires that the facilitator, rather than the children, choose the question that will be explored, with the primary criterion being which question has the greatest philosophical potential.¹⁷ One might argue that Lipman's insistence that the children choose the question makes it less likely that the question that's the most philosophically fruitful will be the one chosen.

I agree with Lipman that the formation of the CPI is at the core of pre-college philosophy sessions. The heart of the transformative potential of philosophy for children is student engagement in a dialogue grounded in the

¹⁵ Thomas Jackson has emphasized the importance of what he calls "intellectual safety" to the development of a CPI. An intellectually safe community is one where any question or comment is acceptable, so long as it does not belittle or devalue others in the group, which allows trust and a corresponding willingness to present one's thoughts to grow among the participants. Thomas E. Jackson, "The Art and Craft of Gently Socratic Inquiry," in *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, 3rd ed., ed. Arthur L. Costa (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curricular Development, 2001), 459-65.

¹⁶ Catherine C. McCall, *Transforming Thinking: Philosophical Inquiry in the Primary and Secondary Classroom* (London: Routledge, 2009), 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90. Similarly, in McCall's CoPI method, the facilitator always calls on students to contribute; in a CPI students can call on one another and use other methods for determining who will be next to speak. In my own experience, having students call on one another, especially as the CPI is progressing, accelerates the formation of an environment in which the students talk to one another rather than directing their remarks to the facilitator.

questions that most appeal to the group and the collaborative attempt to construct meaning and cultivate deep understanding. Lipman's statement that "questioning is the leading edge of inquiry" reflects the primacy of the question. The students' responsibility for choosing the question to begin their discussion enhances the democratic nature of the community and highlights the preeminence within the inquiry of the issues that perplex the students.¹⁸

In any event, I don't believe that assigning responsibility to the children to choose the question diminishes the philosophical content of the dialogue that follows. In my experience, students generally do choose one of the top two or three most philosophically rich questions, and this is especially true as the CPI matures. In fact, students learn, as the CPI progresses, to make better and better decisions about which question is the most philosophically promising. I have always been impressed that children even as young as 8 do not choose their own question or the questions of their friends, but earnestly endeavor to decide which question is most likely to inspire the best discussion. Indeed, one of the skills children acquire through participation in a CPI is discerning which question might be the most fruitful, and understanding why.

Moreover, it is not always the case that the facilitator is the best judge of which question has the most promise for inspiring a philosophically interesting discussion. I have sometimes been mistaken about the significance of the questions asked by students. Many times children have posed questions that at first hearing I judged to be relatively trivial, only to discover as the conversation ensued that the questions asked were in fact quite profound.

For example, in a conversation last year with fifth grade students, the children chose the question, "Why were the children [in the story we were

¹⁸ I do not intend to assert, however, that there is *never* at time at which it is appropriate for the facilitator to choose the question for discussion. Especially once the CPI has developed over some time, there may be texts or activities in which it makes sense for the facilitator to introduce a specific question, or to choose from a list of children's questions in the interests of time or some other consideration. In the ordinary course of a CPI session, however, it should be the students who make this choice.

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reading] interested in talking about dreams?" My initial reaction was to see this as a less significant question than some of the others that the students had posed ("What are dreams?" "Why do we dream?"). However, it turned out that the student who'd asked the question had been puzzled about why at times an issue will be interesting to someone and he or she will want to discuss it, but at other times this will not be the case, and whether this has something to do our ability to articulate what we're thinking. This led to a productive discussion about if and how people are able to communicate what they really think to other people. If the question chosen by the children does turn out to be a not very fruitful one, however, it is the task of the facilitator to help the students move the conversation toward one of the other, more philosophically interesting questions that had been asked by the students.¹⁹

There is a significant relationship between having the children choose the question for discussion and the role of epistemological modesty in the CPI. Epistemological modesty involves an acknowledgement that our beliefs are fallible, that they might turn out to be erroneous. Assigning responsibility to the students for choosing the question enhances the CPI consensus of epistemological modesty in two ways, First, the facilitator is not understood as infallible in his or her ability to discern the most philosophically fruitful question. Second, as Lipman remarked,

[e]ach question has a global potential of putting a portion of the world in question, and this helps pave the way to fallibilism, the practice of assuming one's incorrectness in order to discover errors one didn't know one had made.²⁰

Giving the students the opportunity to "put the world in question," and

¹⁹ The facilitator must monitor the discussion to track when it's moving in a way that is philosophically interesting and when it's not. Of course, in any pre-college philosophy session there will be periods of time when the conversation veers out of the philosophical into science, say, or personal experience. A skilled facilitator will not prohibit personal examples or stories, as they can be useful in the context of exploring a particular issue of philosophy, but will be able to limit such examples and stories to those relevant to the conversation. The aim is to ensure that the discussion is *primarily* philosophical.

²⁰ Lipman, "Philosophy for Children: Some Assumptions and Implications," *op. cit.*, 32.

then to determine which question to discuss, supports their learning that all questions can serve as a reminder of the tentativeness of our claims to knowledge.

Empowering students to choose the subject of their discussion also contributes to their ability to engage in authentic conversations, in which the students are speaking and listening to each other.²¹ Students become accustomed to classroom discourse that is predominantly directed toward giving the teacher what he or she wants to hear. Classroom communication, then, takes place in an isolated sphere, separate from the everyday world in which students talk to one another all the time about issues that matter to them. An authentic conversation in the classroom must involve communication between students, about issues that mean something to them. Entrusting students with the task of deciding which question most merits exploration enables the conditions necessary for the CPI to engender authentic conversations.

In a CPI, the facilitator or teacher must demonstrate a kind of openness and flexibility about where the participants are taking the conversation. Involving a necessarily delicate balance, the facilitator or teacher works to help the students achieve philosophical clarity and depth while at the same time refraining from imposing on the conversation his or her own preferences for subject matter and possible avenues of exploration. Consistent with this, the facilitator, for the most part, should encourage the children to voice their views about which question is likely to be the most philosophically promising, and work to bolster their skills at making good choices in this regard, rather than

²¹ Deanna Kuhn has pointed out, in her work advocating the central place of inquiry and argument in the classroom, the importance of student participation in authentic conversations, during which the discourse between students resembles ordinary conversation in the sense that there is an expectation that they are speaking and listening to one another, rather than student communication being directed only to the teacher, and there is some purpose for having the conversation that is understood by the participants. Deanna Kuhn, *Education for Thinking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 122-25.

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imposing on them the facilitator's own view about which questions hold the most philosophical potential.

We want to foster students' confidence and skill in asking questions. Understanding the ways in which questions are at the core of a CPI session allows us to support children as they cultivate the inclination to question. Lipman wrote:

To question is to institutionalize and legitimize doubt, and to invite critical evaluation. It hints openly of new options and fresh alternatives, in contrast to the stale dichotomy of true/false answers. One must constantly be on the lookout for new ways of encouraging student questioning, not as a matter of habit, but because many practices and institutions, while poorly justified and of dubious, questionable merit, can be found out only by creative questioning.²²

In order to encourage children to engage in "creative questioning," it's essential that we trust their judgment. One of the most exciting aspects of doing philosophy with children is the recognition that children often easily identify many of the philosophically puzzling aspects of human existence and are eager to engage in inquiry about them. Participation in a CPI encourages students to retain the inherent curiosity exhibited by young children, value the role of questioning in learning, and experience the transformative power of a collaborative philosophical dialogue. This requires that philosophy educators give children room to ask their own questions, inquire about the ones most interesting to the community, and to take the conversation where it leads them.

Ultimately this enterprise is not about *teaching* children philosophy, but about *doing* philosophy with children by structuring an environment that allows them to talk with each other about the philosophical issues that puzzle them. We introduce philosophy to children not to bestow our philosophical insights on them, but to facilitate their ability to think for themselves about some of the

²² Lipman, "Philosophy for Children: Some Assumptions and Implications," op. cit., 32.

fundamental aspects of human existence, to develop an awareness of the wide variety of perspectives with which people apprehend the world, and to develop strong analytic reasoning and critical thinking skills. The center from which all of this springs consists, as Mat Lipman taught us, in children's questions.

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