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Developing Communities of Inquiry: The Role of Narrative

Patrick J. Costello
Glyndwr University, p.costello@glyndwr.ac.uk

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My aim in this paper is to examine the role of narrative in developing communities of inquiry. In particular, I shall refer to the teaching of philosophy in schools. Having made some introductory comments about the idea of a 'community of inquiry', I examine a well-known narrative approach which is used to support its development. Finally, I outline on one of my own narratives and offer some suggestions as to how it may be used with students undertaking initial teacher education and training (ITET) and other Education programmes, to promote communities of inquiry.

What is a Community of Inquiry?

The concept of a 'community of inquiry' is now widely used by educators, whose aim is to enable their pupils (or students) to develop and demonstrate an ability to think, reason and argue effectively, both orally and in writing. One of the best-known proponents of a 'community of inquiry' approach to teaching is Matthew Lipman, who developed the Philosophy for Children programme in the USA. Lipman and his colleagues have suggested that:

> When children are encouraged to think philosophically, the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry. Such a community is committed to procedures of inquiry, to responsible search techniques that presuppose openness to evidence and to reason. It is assumed that these procedures of the community, when internalised, become the reflective habits of the individual (Lipman *et al.*, 1980, p.45).

The authors also tell us that in order to create a community of inquiry, certain prerequisites are necessary. There should be a 'readiness to reason, mutual respect (of children towards one other, and of children and teachers towards one another) and an absence of indoctrination' (1980, p.45). These prerequisites require discussion and clarification. Indeed, in teaching modules on 'Thinking Skills and Early Childhood' and 'Education for Citizenship' to final-year undergraduate students taking degrees in Education, I find it a useful exercise to ask them to discuss the following questions:

- What does 'readiness to reason' mean?
- How might a teacher or pupil demonstrate his/her 'readiness to reason'?
- How might a teacher or pupil demonstrate his/her lack of 'readiness to reason'?

- In the context of a classroom discussion, how might teachers and pupils demonstrate 'mutual respect'?
- When teaching a thinking skills programme, e.g. 'Philosophy for Children', is it possible, or indeed desirable, to avoid indoctrination?
- What is 'indoctrination'?

These are important questions, which invite engagement in a now much-neglected aspect of educational theory: the philosophy of education. Of course, one important aim of this discussion is to enable students to focus on the improvement of educational *practice*. However, to attempt to do so without adequate reflection on the key theoretical issues underpinning that practice is to do both teachers and those whom they teach a disservice.

The Role of Narrative in Developing Communities of Inquiry

Narrative is central to Lipman's Philosophy for Children programme, which utilises both novels and teachers' manuals to engage pupils in early years, primary and secondary education in philosophical thinking. In *Philosophy in the Classroom,* the following rationale for the novels, which have been written specifically to develop reasoning skills, is given:

> The books are works of fiction in which the characters eke out for themselves the laws of reasoning and the discovery of alternative philosophical views that have been presented through the centuries. The method of discovery for each of the children in the novels is dialogue coupled with reflection. This dialogue with peers, with teachers, with parents, grandparents and relatives, alternating with reflections upon what has been said, is the basic vehicle by which the characters in the stories come to learn. And it is how real students likewise come to learn — by talking and thinking things out (Lipman et *al*., 1980, p. 82).

How, then, does Lipman conceive of philosophical discussion taking place in the classroom? A typical session would have the following pattern. First of all, children are asked to read aloud an episode or chapter from one of the novels. According to Fisher (2003, p. 31): 'Poor readers are allowed to "pass" and can choose not to read'. In preparing teachers to teach philosophy, Lipman argues it is necessary that they should be introduced to the novels by reading them aloud in the same way that children are asked to do. As he suggests:

> This gives them experience in hearing the language of the text as well as in listening to one another. Taking turns is an exercise in moral reciprocity, and the collective effect of the ensuing discussion is a sharing of the meanings of the text through their appropriation by the group as a whole. Thus, even in the very first stage of exploring the curriculum, the members of the seminar begin to experience themselves as members of a community of shared experience and shared meanings, the first step toward becoming members of a community of inquiry (Lipman, 1988, p. 156).

When the designated episode or chapter has been read, children are asked for their comments on it and they have an opportunity to determine which issues are then discussed.

Elsewhere (Costello, 2000), I have examined the substantial academic, personal and social benefits derived by children who have been introduced to Philosophy for Children in the classroom. Here, however, I would like to address one possible difficulty to be overcome by children who are introduced to Lipman's programme, namely that philosophy is presented entirely through children's novels. Faced with this, teachers may decide either: (a) to ask pupils to read the stories aloud; or (b) to undertake the reading themselves. In my own teaching, I have always opted for the latter approach. Since in a philosophy class, it is important to find out *what* children think and *why* they think it, I see no reason potentially to alienate poor readers at the outset by requiring that they engage, as a preliminary step to doing philosophy, in an activity in which they have little or no ability.

Of course, it may be claimed that allowing pupils to 'pass' when it is their turn to read offers a solution to this problem. However, I would argue that such a view is fundamentally misguided, since children who feel the need to 'pass' because they are poor readers are unlikely to regard themselves as full participants in the lesson. If this is the case, there is the strong possibility that they will become alienated from an activity (philosophy) in which, given a more appropriate teaching methodology, they may have the potential to demonstrate considerable proficiency. In addition, far from 'solving' the problem of poor readers, such an approach actually exacerbates it, since children are simply provided with one more context, within the school day, where their lack of ability is all too evident (and this is the case whether or not they *attempt* to read the passages in question). These are important points, especially as my own research has shown that some of the most able thinkers are children who are perceived by their teachers to be of below average or low ability as regards reading and writing.

The Role of Narrative: An Alternative Approach

My own approach to teaching philosophy in schools has involved three aspects. Firstly, I have written a number of short stories, involving three children who inhabit a fantasy world. As indicated above, these stories are read by myself, rather than pupils, and most of the lesson time is spent discussing philosophical (and other relevant) themes. A second method of engaging children in philosophical reflection is to offer them samples of reasoning (embedded in logical, ethical and more general philosophical problems) to discuss. Finally, diagrammatic representation (e.g. overhead projector transparencies and PowerPoint slides) may be used to initiate discussions (Costello, 2000).

More recently, however, I have begun to write narratives that encompass the life of the contemporary classroom. One such story focuses on a young boy, Joseph Yardley, whose academic performance (as defined by the traditional curriculum, with its emphasis on proficiency in reading and writing) is poor. One day, a student teacher called Mr. Redmond visits the school with his tutor. Mr Redmond begins a conversation with Joseph, based on a single sentence which the latter has written in his exercise book: 'Everyone should think before doing things'. This conversation is necessarily brief because the class teacher, Mrs Howard, asks the class to read a story. As someone who is neither a confident nor successful reader, Joseph struggles. However, towards the end of the lesson, he receives some words of encouragement from Mr Redmond and so looks forward to the student's next visit to the school. As the narrative progresses, we see that Mr Redmond introduces a programme to encourage pupils' thinking, reasoning and argument skills, and Joseph is able to demonstrate, both to himself and others, that he has found an aspect of the curriculum which he enjoys and in which he is successful. Here is an extract from the story, followed by a series of issues and questions that may be discussed with Education students:

> Whatever the weather, there was always something interesting for Joseph to see through the classroom window. Today, beyond teachers' cars, tall trees were bathed in early autumn sunshine. He didn't know their names but Joseph liked the way the trees swayed slowly, moving together as if to a musical rhythm only they could hear.

His eyes rested on a particular tree and he tried to follow the movements of a single branch. After a few seconds, he heard the voice of his teacher, Mrs Howard. It was firm and insistent:

'Joseph Yardley, can you concentrate on your work, please? I'm expecting at least two pages of writing from you this morning'.

Joseph looked at the page before him, blank except for the date. He didn't like writing essays but *thinking* about them was fun. Joseph's mind was always full of stories: epic adventures of the imagination which never got written up fully in his exercise book because he wanted to finish them in his head, to know how they would end, before even picking up his pen.

'How can you write a story if you don't know how it's going to finish?' he whispered to his best friend Helen.

'And no talking please', said Mrs Howard. 'I want you all to concentrate on your essays this morning. After break we'll be having visitors and I want to show them all the good work you've been doing.'

Helen looked over at Joseph, nodded in agreement with him and returned to her writing. Glancing at her book, Joseph saw that Helen hadn't written very much more than him - she never did. Joseph was comforted by this: at least there was one other person in the class who knew what it was like to be a slow writer.

When the bell rang for morning break, Joseph had completed about a third of a page and Helen had written a little more.

'Please leave your books open,' said Mrs Howard, 'we will continue when you come back in.'

As they walked past the other tables, Joseph noticed that some children had written at least two pages. He wanted to say something to Mrs Howard about his ideas for the story and how it might develop but she looked very busy and so he decided not to.

Play time passed all too quickly and when Joseph returned to the classroom, he saw Mrs Howard standing beside his desk, talking to two adults he didn't recognise. She was holding his exercise book and pointing to the left-hand

page. ‘She’s noticed that I haven’t written very much,’ Joseph thought to himself, ‘and she’s telling *them*’.

He approached the table hesitantly. Mrs Howard turned, saw Joseph and said:

‘You haven’t been working very hard this morning, have you, Joseph?’

Before he could answer, she continued: ‘I want a lot more effort from you before lunchtime, otherwise you’ll be staying in to finish this work’.

‘Yes, miss’.

Joseph sat down and looked through the window to the world beyond school. He could see people passing the main gate, hurrying in different directions, busy with life. Joseph wanted to be one of them, on the outside, free to come and go as he pleased.

‘Carry on with your writing, children’, said Mrs Howard.

Joseph looked down at his desk but his book was gone. Where was it? Then, one of the visitors, a young man, came up to the table, placed the book in front of him and pointed to one of the sentences he had written:

‘That’s a very interesting idea, Joseph: can you tell me more about it?’

Joseph followed his finger as it moved across the page, underlining the following words:

Everyone should think before doing things.

Joseph paused for a few seconds before replying: ‘We’ve been asked to write an essay about good rules for the classroom. I haven’t done much yet.’

He expected to be told off again but instead the man smiled at him and said: ‘Why should everyone think before doing things?’

‘Well because lots of things go wrong if people just do what they want.’

‘What sorts of things go wrong? Can you give me an example?’

‘Imagine if I had made a mistake in my book and I needed a rubber. If I take Helen’s without asking, she’ll be upset.’

Hearing her name, Helen looked up and listened carefully.

‘Why would she be upset?’

‘Because I should have asked permission.’

‘Why is it important to ask permission?’

‘Because otherwise, it’s just taking things that don’t belong to you.’

‘And it’s also not being…’

‘Polite.’

Before the conversation could continue, Mrs Howard asked the children to put down their pens.

‘We’re going to read a story about classroom rules now,’ she said. ‘Deirdre and William, please give out these books.’

Joseph sighed wearily. He didn’t like reading either – especially reading aloud from a book in front of the whole class.

‘Right, children, before we start I want to introduce our two visitors. This is Doctor… I mean Professor Thompson from the University and this is Mr Redmond, who will be coming into our class shortly to teach you. What do we say to them?’

The class responded in unison: ‘Good morning, Professor Thompson. Good morning, Mr Redmond’.

The visitors smiled and returned the greeting.

‘One of them’s a doctor’, whispered Helen to Joseph. ‘I had a sore throat last week but it’s better now.’ Helen coughed to be sure that her diagnosis was correct. ‘Yes, all gone.’

‘No, she said he’s a professor’, said a boy sitting at their table.

‘He might do some experiments with us!’, Joseph enthused more loudly than he had intended, ‘That would be good fun.’

Luckily, Mrs Howard didn’t hear him. She asked the class to open their books at page ten.

‘As usual, we’ll take turns to read the story – one paragraph each. Who would like to begin?’

No one volunteered, which was unusual. Most of the children liked to read aloud when offered the opportunity to do so. Today, not a single hand went up in the air.

'They must be shy because of the visitors' thought Joseph.

'Oh they're usually very keen to read,' said Mrs Howard, turning almost apologetically to her guests who were seated at the side of the room. 'Let's see. Teresa, would you like to begin?'

Teresa Ridley was the best reader in the class - everyone knew it - and she completed her passage confidently. 'That's so good, you can continue,' her teacher enthused. Mrs Howard closed her eyes and savoured the words coming from Teresa's lips. Joseph wasn't listening to the story. Instead he studied the line of pupils and calculated that after three children had completed their paragraphs, it would be his turn to read. Hurriedly, his eyes worked their way down the page of the book, trying to find his own section. He was relieved to see that it began easily enough: 'It is a good idea for all children to be…' Then, as he predicted, came the 'big' word, the one he didn't know. It began with a 'c'. He tried to sound it out, saying the individual parts of the word quietly to himself: 'con… sul…'

Before he could finish it, get it into his mind and practise it, Mrs Howard spoke to him. 'Are you talking Joseph? Please listen while Teresa is reading. It'll be your turn soon and you'll want Teresa to listen to you then won't you?'

'Yes, miss'.

Joseph's turn came soon enough. Just as he anticipated, he was unable to read the long word. He said most of it but, before he had a chance to think properly, Teresa completed it for him: 'consulted'.

'Consulted', Joseph repeated. 'I nearly had it,' he said in a murmur.

'Do you know what "consulted" means, Teresa?', asked Mrs Howard.

'Asking our opinions about things.'

'My big sister's always saying that mum doesn't consult her,' said Helen quietly, 'and then there's a big row.'

'Excellent, Teresa,' said the teacher, 'you're doing really well today.'

The rest of the lesson passed uneventfully. Joseph was relieved that he didn't have to read aloud a second time. When the bell rang, the children tidied their desks and waited to be allowed out of the room.

'Perhaps, Mr Redmond, you would like to say a few words to the class about what you have seen of their work this morning?'

'Yes, Mrs Howard, thank you.'

The young man stood up and spoke enthusiastically. 'I just want to say that I'm really looking forward to teaching you all in two weeks' time. You have worked very well this morning. I was impressed by the work you completed in your books and by the way you read the story…'

Joseph wasn't listening; he was thinking about playing football and having his lunch. Then he heard his name and noticed that Mr Redmond was looking at him and so was the whole class. Now his words became clear: 'I'm also very pleased about the quality of your thinking this morning. In particular, Joseph wrote a very interesting sentence: "Everyone should think before doing things". That's something I'd like you all to remember because we're going to discuss it when I see you next time.'

Joseph felt both pleased and proud. Mrs Howard was happy with him: 'Well done', she said. 'You see, you can do very well when you try!'

Joseph left the classroom and walked quickly down the corridor, through the double doors and on to the playground. A gentle breeze welcomed him and the delicious aroma of food being prepared in the school's kitchen filled the air.

'Are you playing football, Joe?' shouted one of his friends.

Joseph ran towards his classmates. Although he didn't realise it, he was smiling. As he joined the group, Joseph saw Mr Redmond's car moving slowly through the school gate. Now he had something to look forward to.

Issues and Questions for Discussion

- Teacher expectation and pupil performance (arising from Mrs Howard's statement to Joseph: I'm expecting at least two pages of writing from you this morning').

- Discuss Joseph's view that 'He didn't like writing essays but *thinking* about them was fun'.
- What does Joseph mean when he says: 'How can you write a story if you don't know how it's going to finish?'
- Should Joseph have attempted to discuss his ideas for the story with Mrs Howard? If he did so, how might she respond? How should she respond?
- Discuss Mrs Howard's question: 'You haven't been working very hard this morning, have you, Joseph?'
- Why does Joseph want to be 'on the outside, free to come and go as he pleased'?
- Evaluate Mr Redmond's approach to teaching as evidenced in: (1) his statement 'That's a very interesting idea, Joseph: can you tell me more about it?'; (2) his follow-up questions.
- What reasons might Joseph have for not wanting to read aloud in front of the whole class? As a teacher, how might you alleviate his difficulty?
- Why is the sentence 'Most of the children liked to read aloud when offered the opportunity to do so' included in the story?
- Why wasn't Joseph listening to the story?
- Mrs Howard asks 'Do you know what "consulted" means, Teresa?' Should Teresa have been the recipient of this question?
- In praising the work of the class, why does Mr Redmond identify Joseph specifically?
- Why did Joseph feel 'both pleased and proud'?
- On the basis of the information you have about Mr Redmond's approach to this lesson, what kinds of teaching style do you think he might adopt on future visits to the school?
- The story concludes with the sentence: 'Now [Joseph] had something to look forward to'. What do you think this 'something' is?

In writing stories such as this and discussing them with students undertaking ITET and other Education programmes, I have several aims. One is to argue that the academic assessment of pupils needs to incorporate the entire range of knowledge and understanding, skills and aptitudes, which they possess. Secondly, I wish to show that a

failure to recognise (and therefore to extend) pupils' abilities may have a deleterious effect on both their academic performance and self-esteem. Finally, I wish to develop in my students a greater understanding of teaching and learning processes, as well as of how to foster the skills of thinking, reasoning and argument. In doing this, it is important to emphasise the vital role played by the teacher in encouraging his/her pupils to believe that: (1) they have something important to say; (2) they should say it; (3) having said it, they should feel good about themselves.

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