The Idea of Critical Thinking and the Aim of Philosophy for children: Thinking beyond "Critical Thinking"

Dr. Jessica Ching-Sze Wang
Associate Professor
Department of Education
National Chiayi University

Abstract:

How to truly engage children in inquiry and dialogue has been a frequent and fundamental concern among Philosophy for Children (P4C) practitioners and researchers. Mathew Lipman defines the ideal dialogue to be one "disciplined by logic," in which the participants follow the argument where it leads. However, the Lipman model of logical reasoning is based on a methodological and procedural notion of rationality; more attention should be given to the natural tendency of children, not to judge but to wonder about the meaning of something. The idea of "criticality" should not be equated with that of judgment—as in judging the reasons for arguments. Feminist scholars also propose to replace the model of rational, critical thinking with constructive, caring thinking. Constructive thinking emphasizes trust over doubt, advocating tolerance for logical contradiction and ambiguity in search of a genuine voice. While scholars have different conceptions as to what critical thinking entails and how to teach it, they seem to agree that P4C communities of inquiry should aim to promote critical thinking. The paper analyzes an example of a P4C classroom discussion to show how critical thinking understood primarily as logical reasoning may close off other possibilities of thinking, such as creative search for meanings. The purpose of the paper is to argue for an alternative focus of P4C—one that privileges the notion of community and communication over that of critical thinking—in order to allow children to participate in a genuine community of inquiry.

Introduction

Philosophy for children (P4C) aims to foster "critical and creative thinking" in children through inquiry and dialogue (Lipman, 2003). The idea of P4C was first initiated in 1970s by the American scholar Mathew Lipman and has since been promulgated to several countries in the world. Lipman wrote many philosophical novels *for* children and *about* children—taking them on a philosophical journey that begins with questions and ends with questions. These questions serve to stimulate discussion among children about the various wonders of every living. Lipman's novels have been translated into eighteen different languages, including Chinese. It was believed that more than five thousand schools in the United States had implemented some form of P4C in their curriculum (Reed, 1999). Now the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), located in Montclair State University, continues to promote the theory and practice of P4C to a wider international audience through its annual workshops and conferences. As more and more teachers expressed interest in turning their regular classrooms into inquiring communities, many questions arose on how to truly engage students in thinking, dialogue, and inquiry.

While scholars have different conceptions as to what critical thinking entails, how to define it, and how to enlist critical thinking skills in dialogue, they all seem to agree that the training of critical thinking skills and the search for truth should be the guiding principles for a P4C community of inquiry. In the Lipman model, critical thinking is closely associated with questioning, analyzing, judging, and most importantly, logical reasoning. The paper challenges the idea that formal logic should be the only guiding principle to engage children in thinking. It calls forth the importance of communication in creating and sustaining a genuine community of inquiry. The paper concludes by arguing that John Dewey's view of communication as essentially transformative, aesthetic, educative, and moral may help us envision a different way of doing P4C.

Critical Thinking as the Primary Goal of P4C: the Lipman Model

The Lipman model of P4C sets its goal on promoting higher-order thinking, which encompasses "critical *and* creative thinking" and amounts to a form of "judgment."   As Lipman writes, "critical thinking involves reasoning and critical *judgment*; creative thinking involves craft, artistry, and creative *judgment*" (emphasis mine).   In other words, to think is to judge.   To judge is "to judge relationships, either by discovering relationships or by inventing them"; "it denotes a process of "finding or making connections and disjunctions" (Lipman, 2003, 16-17).

Accordingly, thinking *as judgment* centers on intellectual activities such as doubting, questioning, comparing, and contrasting.

In *Thinking in Education*, Lipman (2003) proposes a pedagogical method for Philosophy for children: that is, the idea of a "community of inquiry." In this community, students are encouraged to learn collaboratively through active listening to one another, building on each other's ideas, and sharing their views. They are also expected to "assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumption" (Lipman, 2003, 15). Participants in a community of inquiry can bring their own experiences to the discussion but they have to explore disagreements by paying attention to their own thinking and that of others. A community of inquiry, once established, generates its own agenda and "follow the inquiry where it leads rather than being penned in by the boundary lines of exiting disciplines" (Lipman, 2003, 15). Lipman thinks that the idea of a community of inquiry provides an effective pedagogy to engage students in philosophical dialogue and to assist them in the development of critical thinking skills.

Philosophical dialogue that aims to engage children in critical thinking is no mere conversation. As Lipman (2003) contends, critical thinking is self-correcting; it is sensitive to context; it relies on criteria. The underlying purpose of dialogue in inquiry is "progress toward truth" (Gardner, 1995). Such dialogue is neither centered or controlled by teacher or student but by the demands of truth. The search for truth takes children one level beyond their average classroom dialogue. It is a dialogue "disciplined by logic," where participants "must reason in order to follow what is going on" (Lipman, 2003, p 236).   As Lipman elaborates,

> When the classroom has been converted into a community of inquiry, the moves that are made in order to follow the argument where it leads are **logical moves.** As communities of inquiry proceeds with its deliberations, every move engenders some new requiredness. The discovery of **a piece of evidence** throws light on the nature of the further evidence that is now needed. **The disclosure of a claim** makes it necessary to discover the reasons for that claim. **The making of an inference** compels the participants to explore what was being assumed or taken for granted that led to the selection of that particular **inference**. A contention that several things are different demands that the question be raised of how they are to be **distinguished.** Each move sets up a train of **countering and supporting moves**. As subsidiary issues are settled, the community of inquiry's sense of direction is confirmed and clarified, and the inquiry proceeds with renewed rigor (emphasis mine, Lipman, 2003, 236).

The P4C classroom community of inquiry "tries to conform to logic… and move forward

indirectly like a boat tacking into the wind, but in the process its progress comes to resemble that of thinking itself" (Lipman, 2003, 15-16).

The paradigm of critical thinking in the Lipman model of P4C is logical reasoning. The required thinking skills include giving good reasons, making good instinctions, making valid inferences, hypothesizing, asking good questions, using and recognizing criteria, calling for evidence, seeking clarification, offering alternative points of view, building logically on the contributions of others, posing counter examples, asking for reasons, testing and son on (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1980; Sharp, 1993). "One of the values of learning formal logic," Lipman (2003) contends, is that "it requires the learning of rules for the standardization of everyday language so that the complexities of ordinary discourse can be reduced to the simplicities of logical language" (46). Although Lipman (2003) acknowledges that "this does considerable damage to meaning," he thinks that its merits are worthier than the sacrifice, for "it demonstrates to students that natural language has an underlying musculature that makes possible such pushing and pulling as are involved in inference, casual expressions, and the like, and that natural language can be translated into this rudimentary but powerful logical language" (45-46).

With all his emphasis on critical thinking, Lipman is also concerned with creative thinking. He actually posits a mutually reinforcing relationship between critical thinking and creative thinking, saying that "there is no critical thinking without a modicum of creative judgment" and "there is no creative thinking without a modicum of critical judgment" (21). According to Lipman (2003), both thinking aim at "judgment"; the former is concerned with "truth", while latter is with "meaning"; the former is "governed singular criteria," while the latter is "sensitive to contrasting criteria"; the former is "self-correcting," while the latter is "self-transcending"; the former is "sensitive to context," while the latter is "governed by context" (193). However, an important question goes unasked: in actual dialogue, can one reasonably expect a harmonious interplay between these two forms of thinking? Or an inherent tension? In mainstream P4C theory and practice, critical thinking is recognized as a worthy goal to pursue and is thought to be trainable through a systematic practice. Creative thinking, on the other hand, seems to be taken for granted as a natural accompaniment of dialogical practice. The paper is concerned with the potential tension between critical and creative thinking, particularly when critical thinking is narrowly construed as logical reasoning.

Let us look at an example of how logical reasoning serves to guide a P4C classroom discussion and to explore how it may trump otherwise more creative search for meanings.

A Community of Inquiry "Disciplined by Logic"

The following dialogue is taken from Ronald Reeds' article, published in volume 2 of *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children.* The article is entitled "Fifth Graders Discuss Evidence, Knowledge and Truth" (Reed, 1980). This class of fifth graders has been meeting for five weeks, twice a week, and they have been reading up to chapter seven of *Harry Stottlemeirer's Discovery*, the first P4C novel written by Lippman. In this short segment of the transcript, the students were trying to clarify what it means to prove something. Ron is the teacher and his students are Holly, Beth, and Mitch.

Ron: Can I prove to you something that is false? **Can I prove to you 2＋2＝5?**

Holly: *You can prove it,* but I wouldn't believe it because I know it's not true.

Beth: But then you wouldn't be proving it. I mean I'd know it was false and you'd know it was false and it wouldn't be a proof.

Holly: So if we both knew it was false then it would not be proved.

Mitch: **What about if you were proving it to ten people and make believe some people knew it was true and some people knew it was false. Then could you prove it?**

Beth: If some people knew it was true…

Ron: *Isn't that a different case?* Weren't we talking about it being false?

Mitch: Right**. It is false for some people, but it is true for other people.**

Ron: Remember the discussion we had on contradiction. A sentence can't be both true and false at the same time. 2＋2＝4 is either true or false. Can't be both, right?

Mitch: Right.

Ron: Right. You did agree before. *You can change your mind if you want.*

Mitch: O.K. What about if…If…What Beth said was something…*Beth said something would not be a proof because I know it was false and you know it was false.*

Ron: Beth is saying…

Beth: …*that you can't prove something that everybody knows is false. Or really you can't prove something that is false.*

(Pause)

Ron: That's a pretty big change, an addition you made there? No?

Beth: What.

Ron: Well first you said you can't prove something that everybody knows is false. Then you said you can't prove something that simply *is* false. –Whether people *know* it's true or false doesn't seem to matter then.

Beth: O.K.

(Pause)

Ron: Well, what do you want to say now.

Beth: *The second one. It doesn't matter whether anybody knows or not.*

Ron: O.K.   Anybody else have anything to say.

(Pause)

Ron: I bet there's a lot more we could say about proof. But maybe we have enough to begin comparing things. **If you prove something, what you prove must be true.** Right. (Reed, 1980, 69, emphasis mine,)

In this class, Ron and his students were discussing logical concepts, including "proof," "evidence," "knowledge," and "truth."   At the beginning, Ron proposed the question of whether one can prove something that is false, for instance, $2+2=5$. The initial response from Holly is "Yes," even though she added that it wouldn't be believed. This then leads to the next point about the distinction between proving something and believing something, with the underlying assumption that the concept of "proving" requires "someone to believe it to be true." As they exchanged their views, Holly and Beth came to see that something that is known by people as false cannot be proved at all. That is to say, people's "knowledge" (in this case Holly's and Beth's knowledge) of whether something is true or false is taken to constitute a criterion for judging whether the thing can be proved.

At this juncture, Mitch raised an interesting question: what if we come to a situation in which some people believe and others disbelieve? Would that change the answer to the question about proof? This is, indeed, an important point to clarify, one that builds on prior discussion but throws into question the earlier agreement. When Beth tried to respond to Mitch, she was interrupted by Ron, the teacher, who seems to suggest that Beth's reply, though unfinished, might be irrelevant. It was a bit unclear what Ron intended to say. Despite the interruption, Mitch managed to follow the original line of argument, reinstating the unresolved scenario about someone knowing something to be true and others knowing it to be false.

To make himself better understood, Ron offered a specific reminder— "Remember the discussion we had on contradiction. A sentence can't be both true and false at the same time. $2+2=4$ is either true or false. Can't be both, right?" In fact, Ron was trying to point out the logical contradiction in the statement about something being believed as true (by some people) and as not true (by other people). If we follow Ron's logic, the student's statement can be reduced to suggest the following: there is a thing A; A is believed by X as true and is believed by Y as false; A is believed as true and as not true; and therefore, A is true and not true at

the same time. Clearly, the reformulated statement is logically false, however empirically true.

It was not clear whether Mitch grasped the intricate logical reasoning behind Ron's reminder. Mitch responded with a quick "Right" but continued to pursue Beth's earlier point, which was cut short by Ron ("What Beth said was something…"). Then Beth then tried to speak for herself and made a big leap of thinking. She said, "you can't prove something that everybody knows is false. Or really you can't prove something that is false." Ron jumped out to assure the logical significance of Beth's statement and prompted her to clarify her stance. Beth chose the correct logical answer: "It doesn't matter whether anybody knows or not." In other words, she came to see that *something is proved as true because it is true, not because someone believes it as true. Beth's new understanding is soon followed by Ron's concluding remark: "If you prove something, what you prove must be true." The part of the dialogue ended at this point when a logically sound conclusion had been reached, namely, what one claims to prove must be true in itself. Then the teacher moves onto to another discussion about the difference between evidence and proof.

According to Ron (1980), "the classroom discussion was very energetic" (68). The students are given the chance to freely exchange their views; they also actively listen to each other and build on each other's arguments. Most importantly, this dialogue is characterized by an exclusive use of logical rules to guide reasoning. Although logical reasoning serves to propel discussion, it also serves to terminate discussion. In the dialogue, we see that once a logically sound argument has been presented ("if you prove something, what you prove must be true"—regardless of whether someone believes it to be true or false), the discussion proceeds to the next round. Let us imagine what the students might say, if the teacher leaves the floor open for further exploration. They might say something like this: how do we know what is true? Can we ever know what is true? Why do we want to prove it if what I say or what you say about it doesn't matter? If truths are proven true because they are true, who is to prove them in the first place? Can truths prove themselves? Or should truths be proven by people? If the truth is to be proved, doesn't it require a person, the one proving it, to prove it and to know it to be true?

These, of course, are my own speculations, but these speculations will open the room for more divergent, imaginative thinking and for more enrichment of meanings, even though these speculations would change the logic-proof answer that "if you prove something, what you prove must be true." The Lipmanian community of inquiry—with its search for the truth and its emphasis on logical certitude—may suffer from a lack of original, novel, and unconventional thinking.

I do not disagree that objective standards such as logical rules help to orient directions for thinking. However, when logic becomes a monolithic and totalizing force of authority in dialogue, it inevitably closes off other possibilities of thinking, such as the searching for meaning and the reaching for understanding. In addition, logic-centered discussion tends to focus merely on language, i.e., propositional statements, and neglects other symbolic signs in interpersonal dialogue, including bodily senses, emotion, empathy, fantasy, ecstasy and other aesthetic sensibilities and feelings—all of which can contribute to the communication of ideas and the interpretation of meanings.

Thinking beyond Critical Thinking

In the Lipman model of P4C, the idea of "criticality" is narrowly equated with that of judgment, or as Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) point out, that of "evaluation"—as in evaluating the reasons for arguments. According to Vansieleghen, this model that is based on a "methodological ideal of procedural rationality" unfortunately overlooks the natural tendency of children, "not to question, not to doubt, not to judge, but to wonder about the meaning of something" (Vansieleghen, 2005). Although the participants in a community of inquiry are free to express their thoughts, their freedom is bound by the confines of logic. Vansieleghen (2005) uses Hanah Arednt's notion of freedom to suggest a cogent point:

> According to Arendt, freedom recites in natality, and the responsibility to respond to the appearance of something or someone new is what she has called "thinking." This thinking cannot be acquired in conventional ways; it is not a capacity for reflexive problem-solving, or a skill or a strategy; rather it is a search for meaning (Vansieleghen, 2005, 30).

Moreover, "freedom has nothing to do with choices, it is rather to do with the possibility of creating something that did not exist before, neither as thing or image, nor as knowledge itself. It is the possibility of the impossible" (Vansieleghen, 2005, 25).

Contemporary feminist critiques of mainstream critical thinking theories also reveal the inherent problems with exclusive emphasis on logic and rationality. Barbara Thayer-Bacon (1993), for example, proposes to replace the model of rational, critical thinking with constructive, caring thinking. She says:

> To be a caring thinker, one needs a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity, and one needs to learn to live with conflict. She has to abandon the either/or distinctions of traditional thinking and search for a unique and authentic voice (Thayer-Bacon, 1993: 335).

Thayer-Bacon also argues against the long-standing separation between the knowing

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self and the known object and seeks to legitimize and authenticate what she calls "the subjective voice."

> Subjective voice is not selfish, self-centered voice. It is just what each of us contributes to any knowing situation. By this account, we develop our thinking skills as we develop our communication skills, and our social skills, by being in relations with others. (Thayer-Bacon, 1993, 337).

Thayer-Bacon contends that the feminist epistemological paradigm takes knowledge to be fluid and dynamic, depending on how people interact and share insights.

As far as critical rationality is concerned, Nick Burbules (1993) also proposes to use reasonableness to replace Reason with a capital R. While rationality sets up a system of rules with which everyone has to comply, reasonableness is sensitive to the demands of people and context. Reason cannot be devoid from practice and should be "a practice growing out of communicative interactions in which the full play of human thought, feeling and motivation operates" (Burbules, 1993, 85-86)

In Mathew Lipman's formulation of the idea of a community of inquiry, the focus is on inquiry. Community is important only in so far as it assists participants in the process of inquiry. Lipman (2003, 229) observes that "the glue that holds a community together is practice." However, Lipman takes the idea of community for granted, assuming that as long as there is a group of people gathering together to practice philosophical dialogue, a community automatically emerges. However, this assumption is problematic. A mere group of people can hardly qualify as a community of inquirers when it is not intellectually safe to talk among participants and when a few people, the teacher included, dominate discussion.

A very experienced P4C practitioner and philosopher, Thomas Jackson, notes the importance of listening over that of questioning.

> A salient feature of dialogue is not questioning (let alone, cross-examination) but listening. Dialogue's first interest is not to counter, debate, disagree, lead, or expose, but to genuinely and simply listen. This quality of listening requires setting one's own thoughts in order to be truly open to what the other is saying. This is especially important because the "other" in this case will most often be a child, and gentleness must be foremost in one's mind if one hopes to be privileged with an authentic response from a child. (Jackson, 2001, 459)

The following reflections from another P4C practitioner Thomas Yos are also revealing:

> I still whole-heartedly believe in the power of philosophical inquiry. But I've also come to realize that there is a very important something else that makes P4C's community of inquiry so valuable. What's important about the Community of Inquiry, especially about this day and age, isn't just the Inquiry

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part; it's the community part. . . . It is so important because it purposefully cultivates what many of today's schools are unwisely leaving too far on the fringe: The loving, caring, fun-filled human relationships that are at the core of human flourishing. (Yos, 2011)

In short, the emphasis on logic alone is insufficient, if not inherently inadequate, to create "the loving, caring, fun-filled relationships" that help to sustain a genuine "community" of inquiry.

As noted earlier, Barbara Thayer-Bacon and Nick Burbules both point to the importance of communication in dialogical discussion and the training of thinking. John Dewey's theory of communication can also provide inspirations for the discussion at hand. Dewey's idea about the interconnection between communication and reflective thinking is worth noting. As Gert Biesta notes, "communication is process of social coordination and cooperation," and its process, "not only effectuates common understanding and a common, shared world, but it is also the origin of reflection and reflective consciousness" (Biesta, 2004, 27). The importance of communication in Dewey's overall philosophy of education can be seen by this opening remark in chapter five of *Experience and Nature*: "Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful" (LW 1: 132). The importance of communication for Dewey is so prominent that Sleeper (1986) argues that Dewey in fact does not attempt to talk about experience or nature in that book but to "work out a theory of how communication is possible and why we need it" (117).

In Dewey's mind, "all communication is like art" (Dewey, MW 9: 9). It is a "transformative art" (Crick, 2001) in that it "enlarges and enlightens experience" and "it stimulates and enriches imagination" and it "creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought" (Dewey, MW 9:9). This responsibility of thinking does not lie in conforming to antecedent logical rules but in endeavoring to make our own ideas as accurate and vivid as possible in order to fully communicate it to others. In *Public and Its Problems*, Dewey ends the book by stating that "Democracy will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly weeded to the art of full and moving communication" (Dewey, LW 2: 350).   In my view, P4C has the potential of realizing the dream Dewey envisions, if, in P4C theory and practice, we can resolve the tension and work out a harmonious interplay between critical and creative thinking, between the search for the truth and the search for meaning. The first step to take is to "think" beyond "critical thinking."

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