Community of Inquiry: Its past and present future

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Abstract

The following paper outlines the historical and philosophical development of, ‘community of inquiry’ in educational discourse. The origins of community of inquiry can be found in the philosophical work of C. S. Peirce. From Peirce the notion of community of inquiry is adopted and developed by educational theorists of different orientations. Community of inquiry denotes an approach to teaching that alters the structure of the classroom in fundamental ways. With particular consideration given to the unique philosophical origins of this approach, this paper outlines and discusses how community of inquiry is situated in today’s educational landscape.

Keywords: inquiry, community, peirce, children, discourse

Introduction

‘Community’ is becoming a major part of educational discourse today. Community of practice (Wenger, 1998), learning community (Peterson, 1992), community of learners (Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996), classroom community (Bridges, 1995), and other phrases involving community can readily be found in a search of educational topics. This suggests that the term ‘community’ is at play in educational discourse, and its prolific use means that it plays in many ways in that discourse. Our intent is to discuss ‘community’ in relation to its use in the phrase ‘community of inquiry’. How and why a classroom might become a community of inquiry is different depending on one’s philosophy of education. The notion ‘community of inquiry’ has its origins in the work of C. S. Peirce. Later, community of inquiry was extensively developed by Matthew Lipman. Recently, it has been adopted by scholars in social studies education, and sociocultural theory. In this paper we will represent community of inquiry in a way that takes into consideration its historical development. Finally, we will discuss specifically what the challenges and possibilities are for community of inquiry as a pedagogical practice in today’s educational landscape.

C. S. Peirce and Community of Inquiry

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was both a scientist and a philosopher. These dispositions had a major impact on his work as he sought to bring the method of
science to philosophy. Peirce's drive to bring scientific inquiry to philosophy was in large part a reaction to the dominance of Cartesianism in modern philosophy (Murphy, 1990). Peirce believed that philosophy had gone awry with its adoption of a Cartesian view of knowledge. Descartes reconstituted the Western view of knowledge by positing the mind as an inner space which directly apprehends ideas, and it is these ideas which, when clearly and distinctly perceived, constitute knowledge. It is worth quoting Peirce's understanding and criticisms of Cartesianism at length as it is his reaction to this system that inspires his notion of community of inquiry:

Descartes is the father of modern philosophy and the spirit of Cartesianism—that which principally distinguishes it from the scholasticism which it displaced—may be compendiously stated as follows:

1. It teaches that philosophy must begin with universal doubt; whereas scholasticism had never questioned fundamentals.
2. It teaches that the ultimate test of certainty is to be found in the individual consciousness; whereas scholasticism had rested on the testimony of sages and of the Catholic Church.
3. The multiform argumentation of the middle ages is replaced by a single thread of inference depending often upon inconspicuous premises.
4. Scholasticism had its mysteries of faith, but undertook to explain all created things. But there are many facts which Cartesianism not only does not explain, but renders absolutely inexplicable, unless to say that ‘God makes them so’ is to be regarded as an explanation.

In some, or all of these respects, most modern philosophers have been in effect, Cartesian. Now without wishing to return to scholasticism, it seems to me that modern science and modern logic require us to stand upon a very different platform from this. (Peirce, p. 228)

Peirce offers specific criticisms to what he calls the ‘spirit of Cartesianism’. His objections are important because it is within his objections that we begin to understand the development of his notion of community of inquiry. First of all, Peirce rejects the notion that philosophy must begin with universal doubt. He says, ‘We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy’ (Peirce, p. 228). Peirce did not believe a person could doubt everything all at once as we must act in the world, and action requires belief in a great many things. Any attempt at universal doubt would end in self-deception, Peirce believed. To the second tenet, Peirce argues that if truth and certainty are to be found in the individual consciousness then, ‘If I were really convinced, I should have done with reasoning, and should require no test of certainty. But thus, to make single individuals absolute judges of truth is most pernicious’ (Peirce, p. 229). It is in his rejection of this tenet of Cartesianism that we find Peirce allude to the importance of community:
In sciences in which men come to agreement, when a theory has been broached, it is considered to be on probation until this agreement is reached. After it is reached, the question of certainty becomes an idle one, because there is no one left who doubts it. We individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the community of philosophers. Hence, if disciplined and candid minds carefully examine a theory and refuse to accept it, this ought to create doubts in the mind of the author of the theory himself. (Peirce, p. 229)

This notion of people coming together to serve as jury to ideas and hypotheses is the basis for Peirce’s notion of community of inquiry. Where people come together in agreement, ‘one can speak of knowledge, truth, and reality, but these concepts will be grounded in the community of inquirers, not in the individual consciousness’ (Murphy, p. 12). Community of inquiry is central for Peirce who used the terms ‘community’ and ‘inquiry’ to refer to a group of individuals (most often scientists) employing an interpersonal method for arriving at results.

In Peirce’s work, the issue of community develops further around his treatment of theories of reality (metaphysics). In his philosophical writings, Peirce argued for the idea that there is a world independent of our minds, which we can develop beliefs about. He says, ‘[R]eality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it’ (Smith, p. 39). For Peirce, we come to know the world via a communal and pluralistic community of inquirers engaged in a scientific method of inquiry. If persistent, Peirce believed, the community would eventually arrive at the same conclusions, thus coming to know the real. In Peirce’s own words, ‘The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed upon by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality’ (Peirce, p. 38).

Inquiry, for Peirce, is embodied in the scientific method of arriving at conclusions through synthetic reasoning. This kind of reasoning is inductive in its character as it moves from old beliefs, through experience, to new beliefs. Peirce believed that the human mind moves between poles of doubt and belief. Doubt is a state of agitation that leads to uncertainty. Belief is a state that allows for action, and confidence, eventually turning into habit. Between doubt and belief lies inquiry (Smith, 1983, p. 47). Smith explains this further:

Serious inquiry aimed at acquiring knowledge of the real world … starts with the assumption that there is an answer, the answer to the question that directs the process. Moreover, there is the further assumption that this answer would be found if the inquiry persisted. (Smith, p. 48)

So the method of inquiry for Peirce is what is crucial to producing knowledge that can be believed. That is, ‘[r]eality, insofar as it is identified through ultimate belief resulting from inquiry, is defined by a form of rationality rather than by the fact of a belief’s being held’ (Smith, p. 49). Peirce believed inquiry to be a rational,
scientific process that by virtue of its logic (form) would yield the same conclusion regardless of the interests of those inquiring.

Peirce vehemently rejected the idea that we can achieve any significant insights, or reliable knowledge, from introspection. This belief is a reaction to the Cartesian view that we can be clear and distinct about our own thinking. For Peirce, it is necessary for us to subject our thinking to standards that lie outside of our own interests, concerns, and reflections. In this way, thinking must continually be subject to a community whose standards allow us to correct and revise our ideas in the course of living our lives.

From this position, we get a feel for the importance of community to Peirce’s view of inquiry. The community of inquirers, accepting of the method of scientific investigation, serves as the arbiter of standards and the justification for the production of reliable knowledge. The individual scientist conducting experiments is never really alone, for she uses methods that are accepted by a community and she must continually revise her thought processes and observations in relation to the standards set by that community. Smith adds insight to this position:

The community of investigators purporting to be scientific is defined by the willingness of each individual member to sacrifice what is personal and private ... in order to follow the dictates of an interpersonal method that involves free exchange of views and results. (Smith, p. 50)

In this way, the individual inquirer is always subject to the standards of the community, which they have accepted by the adoption of methods of science. Community, in this case, is the actual community of scientific inquirers who are engaged in the rational deployment of synthetic reasoning. A quote by Smith summarizes Peirce’s notion of the community of inquiry:

The idea of science as an activity engaged in by a community of inquirers, and the conception of reality as an ultimate opinion reached by the process of inquiry, are reciprocal notions. On the one side we have the idea of the real as an ultimate opinion which is, though not external to thought in general, still independent of what this, that, or the other individual thinker may happen to think. On the other side we have the idea of the method reaching such an opinion that requires individual inquirers to constitute themselves as members of the community of science through their willingness to sacrifice their privacy and bind themselves by the rules of an interpersonal method. (Smith, p. 51)

A community of inquiry, Peirce believes, is the model for the production of knowledge that will lead us from doubt to belief, and eventually to the ‘real’. Peirce’s use of these terms is important because aspects of his usage remain in tact in recent uses of community of inquiry. In fact, it is Peirce’s model of community of inquiry that describes not only communities of scientific inquirers, but also communities of historical inquirers, philosophical and psychological inquirers, and other discipline-based communities of inquiry.
Community of Inquiry in Philosophy for Children

Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, founders of Philosophy for Children, adopted community of inquiry directly from Peirce. Community of inquiry receives an extended treatment in Philosophy for Children. This perspective takes seriously the notion that philosophical inquiry should be one of the core elements of elementary school life (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980). The reason for this? Education should empower children to be thoughtful about the lives they lead, and doing philosophy is important to that goal. Philosophical inquiry involves the consideration of different perspectives through discussion and philosophical inquiry, and it teaches ways of reasoning about the world that enhance student’s abilities to think critically, deliberately, and imaginatively about their worlds. The vehicle by which philosophical inquiry is implemented in elementary schools is a curriculum based on philosophical novels that students and teachers read together in teacher-led communities of inquiry.

A typical Philosophy for Children class session might begin with the teacher and students choral reading part of a chapter from one of the curriculum novels. The inquiry would begin with the teacher soliciting remarks from the students. This is an important feature of this practice because, in this forum, it is the students who choose what is interesting and raise issues for discussion. To the extent that most classrooms focus on the teacher as the director of inquiry, this shift of power is an important step in the empowerment of students. By shifting the balance of power in the classroom away from the teacher, one shifts the frameworks for participation in the classrooms (O’Connor & Michaels, 1996). When this happens, students have the potential to become more engaged in classroom discourse, take more speaking turns, and speak for longer periods of time (Cazden, 1988, Anderson et al., 1998). These changes are important because they position students in fundamentally different ways; students become an important part of the inquiry and their thoughts are an integral part of any discussion. In this environment students are actively responsible for creating and sustaining discussions, and are confronted with their own thinking and the thoughts of their fellow students in an environment of mutual respect with an accomplished inquirer (the teacher). Discussions about reality (metaphysics), what is right (ethics), and language are common topics for inquiry. In the end though, it is the process of inquiry that is most important, and the discussions often begin in areas that are not philosophical. But this does not mean that the teacher does not have any say how topics are discussed. Let me say more about this process of inquiry.

A discourse community centered on philosophical inquiry is the primary vehicle by which philosophical ways of talking and thinking are fostered. Early in the formation of a community of inquiry, the teacher facilitates discussion and scaffolds appropriate forms of participation in the community. As Matthew Lipman states, ‘Thus we can now speak of converting the classroom into a community of inquiry in which students listen to one another with respect, build on one another’s ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one
another's assumptions’ (Lipman, p. 15). Ideally, as the community becomes more skilled and begins to gain confidence, the teacher takes a less active role in the inquiry. ‘Inquiry’, in Philosophy for Children, means, ‘perseverance in self-corrective exploration of issues that are felt to be both important and problematic’ (Lipman, p. 20). In other words, an inquiry is a sustained exploration of a topic or issue that is of interest to students; community members participate in inquiries in the hope of understanding the many ways of thinking about an issue and the production of knowledge about the self and the world.

We can connect this back to Peirce when we consider that the classroom community of inquiry, which includes students and teachers, becomes a model of the kind of scientific community of which Peirce spoke. This community is the arbiter of the standards of the community and embodies, by its practices, the conventions that dictate sound from unsound inquiry practices.

Furthermore, a community of inquiry attempts to follow the inquiry where it leads rather than being penned in by boundary lines of existing disciplines. As Lipman states, ‘Such a community is committed to the procedures of inquiry, to responsible search techniques that presuppose an openness to evidence and to reason’ (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980, p. 45). The community of inquiry must arise from an environment that has certain preconditions.

1. Readiness to reason;
2. Mutual respect (of children towards one another, and of children and teachers towards one another);
3. An absence of indoctrination. (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, p. 45)

Because reasoning is one of the things the Philosophy for Children curriculum purports to cultivate, the readiness to reason will eventually be transformed into formal abilities to reason through the teaching of formal and informal logic.

While the second presupposition might seem overly egalitarian, it is not the case that the teacher and students are completely equal. The teacher is viewed as the more experienced when it comes to the procedures and techniques of inquiry, and background knowledge. But this authority is not supposed to extend to the favoring of particular points of view. The teacher must assist students in following the paths of their own thinking and the teacher must always stop at the point of legitimizing or delegitimizing particular points of view. As Lipman et al. explain, ‘Under the banner of “pluralism”, it may be contended, the convergence of views is precluded, agreement and assent are ruled out, and intellectual diversity becomes the order of the day’ (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, pp. 45–6). As we will discuss later in the paper, this stance is largely antithetical to the standards-based curriculum assessed through high-stakes testing becoming commonplace in local schools today.

Building on the previous point, indoctrination is thought to be subverted through the adoption of a pluralistic stance. On one level this is naïve, as teaching, of any sort, involves ideological commitments that preclude neutrality. Pluralism is a doctrine against monism. Pierce was also against monistic doctrines. However, this presupposition is meant to convey the idea that the teacher must not hold the
belief that ideas and opinions must always converge. They present this precondition as necessary to the creation of a community of inquiry. Our point here is that community of inquiry is not neutral, or without ideological commitments. Table 1 lists the nine mechanisms of community formation that constitute the key elements of Community of Inquiry for Lipman. They are the ways a group of students and a teacher becomes a community. Described a little differently, the community forms by being dialogically inquisitive, active and reflective, articulate, cognitively adept, cooperative, sensitive to context, and explorative.

Philosophy for Children has been practiced for 30 years. Community of inquiry remains at the heart of the movement and has received extensive development by those using principles of Philosophy for Children in the classroom.

We can see the influence of Pierce in the articulation of community of inquiry offered by those in Philosophy for Children. The description of inquiry as a self-corrective process, and the emphasis on the form (logic) of inquiry come directly from Peirce. Communities of inquiry are modeled after scientific communities of inquiry where the explorations of ideas and reasoning are publicly displayed and scrutinized. This display and scrutiny eventually lead to the creation/construction of knowledge about the self, and the world. While many different avenues of thought can be explored in a philosophical community of inquiry some topics and forms of reasoning will be more legitimate than others. Every participant in a community is like an individual scientific inquirer, making the community of inquiry itself a microcosm of the scientific community of inquirers at large. In order to round out this picture a little, let’s look at some other significant understandings of community of inquiry.

Other Understandings of Community of Inquiry

Gordon Wells (1999) addresses the practice of communities of inquiry in terms of cultural-historical activity theory (Cole 1996). As Wells states:

Table 1: Mechanisms of Community Formation in Philosophy for Children

| 1. Group solidarity through dialogical inquiry |
| 2. The primacy of activity and reflection |
| 3. The articulation of disagreements and the quest for understanding |
| 4. Fostering cognitive skills (e.g., assumption finding, generalization, exemplification) through dialogical practice. |
| 5. Learning to employ cognitive tools (e.g., reasons, criteria, concepts, algorithms, rules, principles) |
| 6. Joining together in cooperative reasoning (e.g., building on each other’s ideas, offering counterexamples or alternative hypotheses, etc.) |
| 7. Internalization of the overt cognitive behavior of the community (e.g., introjecting the ways in which classmates correct one another until each becomes systematically self-corrective)—’intrapsychical reproduction of the interpsychical’ (Vygotsky) |
| 8. Becoming increasingly sensitive to meaningful nuance of contextual differences |
| 9. Group collectively groping its way along, following the argument where it leads (Lipman, p. 242) |
Central to this approach is the building of a ‘community of inquiry’, in which students frequently work together in groups on the same or related inquiries, and in which a critically important activity is whole class meetings for review and reflection on what is planned, in progress or has been achieved. It is in these meetings, in particular, that the dialogue of knowledge building occurs most deliberately and systematically as the relationship among the individual or group inquiries are explored in relation to the common theme, alternative suggestions and perspectives are considered and evaluated. … These meetings also provide an occasion for taking a ‘meta’ stance with respect to the processes in which students are engaging, for describing strategies that seem to be effective, and for recognizing and valuing the diversity of ideas that are contributed to the forging of a common understanding. (Wells, pp. 7–8)

We can see many similarities between the statements Wells puts forth and those of Philosophy for Children and Peirce. The basic idea being students and teachers engaged in communities that actively engage in dialogue over topics of interest, in the service of constructing knowledge and common understanding, and internalizing the discourse of the inquiring community. Again, the community becomes the arbiter of legitimate and illegitimate forms of inquiry. There is also treatment of community of inquiry in the discourse over history and its teaching.

In studying community of inquiry in the teaching of history, Peter Sexias (1993) distinguishes between two different communities of inquiry: the intellectual community of inquiring historians and the community of inquiry in the classroom. The community of inquiring historians, Sexias notes, are engaged in the production of historical knowledge. This community’s task has been greatly problematized by the challenges to modern epistemology some of which come from Social Constructivists and others from people like Kuhn (1970), Lakatos & Musgrave (1970). As Sexias notes, ‘[t]he constructivist recasting of curriculum thought in the past 15 years has been based not in a Kuhnian revision in epistemology of the subject disciplines but in developments in learning theory and psychology’ (Sexias, p. 306). Sexias characterizes this tension nicely as it relates to communities of inquiry:

First, what are the limits to the analogy between scholarly and school-based communities of inquiry, whose participants have not been inducted through graduate programs and doctoral degrees? Second, if knowledge is based on the conversation within a community of the competent, what is the status of the products of that conversation? Third, what is required of teachers who, in this conceptualization, must bridge two significantly different communities? (Sexias, p. 306)

On the one hand we have the communities of discipline-based inquirers, be they from history, philosophy, or mathematics, and, on the other hand, we have communities of inquiring students in classrooms. The relationship between these two has traditionally been one way, where knowledge constructed in the disciplines gets transformed into curricula for students in schools. Historians have their own sets
of problems they deal with, lately ones of epistemology and historical sense making (Sexias, 1993), and teachers and students have their own struggles with the teaching and learning of history. Sexias believes that any attempt to conflate the two groups is dangerous. He must have reservations about students’ abilities to do what historians do. At the same time, he believes that many historians would not support a unidirectional flow of knowledge professional communities to school curriculum (Sexias, p. 313).

**Implications of this Review**

Community of inquiry can be applied to groups of students in classrooms, or, to the practitioners of a discipline like history or chemistry. Peirce believed that philosophy should adopt the kind of community of inquiry that characterized communities of inquiring scientists where each scientist was faithful to the scientific method as they made their own individual inquiries and then subjected their findings to public scrutiny. Lipman gave a distinctively developed characterization of philosophical communities of inquiry while arguing for the place of philosophy in K-12 education. Other thinkers have called for the creation of communities of inquiry as the new form that groups of teachers and students should adopt. This would yield classrooms where teachers and students would inquire into topics of mutual interest with one another. Classrooms would become places where interest-inspired inquiry would become the new curriculum, replacing the model where teachers and other authorities alone dictate what and how things are learned. This is especially the case where an inquiry approach to education is being practiced because an inquiry approach, with its emphasis on student interest and the answering of questions, is used to structure discussion and to pursue knowledge.

One aspect of a group of people becoming a community is that they should be able, to some extent, to dictate the terms of their relationship to one another. Of course, there are many instances where individuals join communities and accept the fact that they are agreeing to rules not of their making. In fact, joining a political, social, or academic organization often requires that one accept certain terms of membership without initially having a say in those terms. But communities of inquiry in classrooms, where the community’s mandate requires that student interest, and mutual respect and concern, are key elements of the community, require that the members of the community be active in determining some of the constitution of the community.

A community of inquirers must have some freedom to dictate how it will operate and what it will operate on. And while many of the communities we belong to are not constituted by our preferences, communities of inquiry in schools are supposed to be more genuine in their determination of community constitution. In Peirce’s conception of community of inquiry, the community is paramount because it holds the public criteria by which scientific work can be inspired, critiqued, and legitimized. In Philosophy for Children the community serves these purposes while focusing on inquiry and reasoning over philosophical matters; it was also a place where mutual respect and concern for all participants is a primary value.
But the term ‘community’ denotes a togetherness that may not be a necessary condition for the kind of inquiry we want in schools. If we mean by the term ‘community’, something more than a loosely associated group of people, then ‘community’ might be something to strive for yet, something that is not immediately attainable in a classroom setting. A community that works together, has mutual respect and concern, and a recognizable and agreed upon set of assumptions and procedures is something that takes a long time to develop, and may not be essential at the outset of a process of inquiry. Looking back at the preconditions of Philosophy for Children (Table 1) it is not hard to understand that those kinds of conditions take time to foster and cultivate. In this respect, Sexias is right to distinguish between professional communities of inquiry and classroom communities of inquiry. As students are not in school voluntarily, and as they are usually subjected to a curriculum that is not of their making, forcing students to be part of a learning community at the beginning of a schooling experience is unreasonable. They do not, at the outset, represent the shared values of scholarship and participation that members of a professional, discipline-based, community of inquiry do. While inquiry-based teaching and learning is possible without community, it might be that the teacher will have to act, at least temporarily, as the voice of the community until, and if, a community forms.

Also, students are not necessarily practiced inquirers, like Peirce’s community of scientists, before they enter school. So they cannot really act as the kind of community Peirce spoke of until they learn, value, and begin to practice a common set of procedures and activities that are typical of a community of inquiry. So it seems that teacher-guided inquiry must come before community in the classroom setting. Sexias is right to make the distinction between communities of practicing historians and communities of students in classrooms; they are very different. But if we ever want students to be more than the receivers of the results of a process of inquiry (via curricula), then we will need to foster communities of inquiry in school that engage in practices that are similar to those of communities of historians, literary theorists, chemists, social scientists, and the like. This will require us to educate teachers in such an environment as well, so they can lead communities of historical, scientific, literary, and mathematical inquiry with knowledge and skill of the methods used by professionals in the disciplines. Executing this kind of teacher education is no small undertaking.

In the meantime, teachers can still try to have inquiry be a sincere part of the day by limiting the topics of possible inquiries to those mandated by curriculum developers. The work of Ball (1993) and Levine-Rose (1999) are exemplary on this point. While we consider this somewhat of a compromise, to act otherwise could compromise many students in an environment where their futures are heavily determined by high-stakes tests.

Thus, in conclusion, students and teachers becoming communities of inquirers is not an automatic happening that can take place in just any environment. It takes a teacher that has both the experience and beliefs to support the growth of such a group, and administrative and curricular support to foster the right environment for the teacher and students. While there is an important difference between
professional communities of inquiry and classroom communities of inquiry, there
should be some attempt by classroom communities of inquiry to engage in the
practices of professional communities of inquiry.

Finally, we live in times that are hostile towards meaningful learning. Student
choice and interest are the last things in the minds of policy makers who come
up with ideas that link school funding to performance on standardized tests. So
communities of inquiry must work within the confines of curriculum mandates
and to the greatest extent possible, students must be given opportunities to explore
their interests within the parameters of the prescribed curriculum of a district or
state. Without this latitude, community of inquiry will never become the powerful
force for meaningful learning that it can be.

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