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Opportunities and Challenges in Using the "Community of Inquiry" Model in Teaching Ethics

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Abstract: *Philosophy for children (P4C) is an area that has experienced impressive growth in recent decades, proving to be a highly valuable resource in children's development. Studies demonstrate its significant impact on the development of logical thinking, critical reasoning, imagination, and fostering openness to dialogue and collaboration. While there are various perspectives and methods in the field of philosophy for children, a common element among them all is the centrality of the concept of dialogue. P4C serves as a paradigmatic example of what dialogical education represents. The underlying assumption of this paper is that the specific practices of philosophy for children provide valuable methods and perspectives that can be useful in teaching ethics in communication and ethics in general, particularly for students without prior training in philosophy. Recognizing the potential challenges and the need for context-specific adaptation, this paper seeks to illustrate how the integration of the models used in P4C practices, such as the communities of inquiry, into communication ethics education, can provide a promising and innovative approach to fostering ethical and critical thinking in students.*

Keywords: *philosophy for children, ethics, communication ethics education, community of inquiry, dialogue.*

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Introduction. Shared foundations: philosophy for children and communication ethics pedagogy

To an important extent, we live in a world shaped by communication, a world that is constructed by and in communication (Codoban, 2011). Educating communication specialists in a way that ensures that they both know what ethical communication means and have acquired and exercised the skills needed to communicate ethically and effectively is crucial. The interest for the academic field of communication ethics in general and for communication ethics pedagogy in particular has been on the rise in recent years (Goldzwig, 1991; Kienzler, 2001; Ballard et al., 2014) with more and more educational institutions becoming aware of the key importance of the study of communication ethics and taking action to introduce communication ethics training courses and programs. Numerous scholars explore the pedagogical aspects of communication ethics, approaching the subject from two primary angles. First, they address the challenge of defining the field and determining its position in relation to other disciplines, as exemplified by Ballard et al. (2014). Second, they adopt a more practice-oriented perspective, focusing their attention on methodological aspects.

In terms of the objectives and competencies addressed within the field of communication ethics education, there is a general consensus, despite variations in their formulation. The study of communication ethics primarily focuses on four key aspects. Firstly, it involves the ability to recognize the ethical issues, to identify the problematic areas, and to distinguish between the ethical and the legal aspects of a situation. Secondly, it aims to contribute to the development of analytical skills and to the ability to reason in a correct way. Then, there is the fostering of a tolerant attitude towards ambiguity and disagreements. This objective underscores one of the most significant aspects of ethics education, namely the stimulation of the moral imagination, of the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes. Lastly, it strives to instill a sense of moral responsibility and the willingness to reflect meaningfully on one's personal moral compass, values and behavior. (Deaver, 2004) This willingness is in fact the mark of moral competence, "defined by an acute awareness of disorientation and, at the same time, an inability to consent to predetermined landmarks." (Pleşu, 1994, 8)

Ballard et al. (2014) identify four main pedagogical approaches in communication ethics. One focuses on ethics in human communication in general, with no special emphasis on professional communication. The

second one relies mostly on the moral intuition of the student and aims to build on it the educational process, even if there are reasonable concerns vis-à-vis the adequacy of the moral emotional aspect as the basis of the process of ethical education. (Ballard et al., 2014). The third one starts from the complex and sophisticated premise of an essential interwinding of communication and ethics, as fundamental aspects of human condition. The fourth approach, coming from the area of "critical pedagogy", cultivates a more applied perspective, promoting an engaged and activist attitude. (Ballard et al. 2014, 8) Each of these approaches comes with its advantages and shortcomings, so the authors argue repeatedly that a field as diverse as communication ethics pedagogy requires a mix of perspectives and methodologies. More specifically, they state that "understanding and valuing different pedagogical approaches coupled with the development of developing strong, clear, and measurable learning outcomes should be the overarching goal of departments and conversations about how to teach and integrate communication ethics." (Ballard et al., 2014, 9)

Clearly, there is an overlap between teaching ethics in communication and the field of philosophy for children (P4C). Communication ethics teaching and philosophy for children meet in common principles, in the emphasizing of critical thinking and in the fostering of dialogue. The P4C practices encourage children to engage in ethical conversations and encourage moral development (daVenza Tillmanns, 2021; Bălan, 2023), aligning with the communication ethics goal of responsible communication. Both fields emphasize the importance of nurturing care and open dialogue while embracing diverse viewpoints and showing respect for diverging opinions. Starting from the premise that at the core of philosophy for children practices there is the concept of a reasonable person, Tim Sprod proposes the concept of 'reasonableness' as a guiding point in ethics teaching (Sprod, 2001). In this respect he highlights five key aspects of thinking, namely: "critical, creative, committed, contextual and embodied" (Sprod, 2001, 14) that are relevant to both areas.

Dialogue in the philosophy for children field

Philosophy for children (P4C) is an area where the theoreticians of dialogue find a special place, given the fact that dialogue is a key concept in P4C practices and that these practices are a paradigmatic example for what dialogical education means. This centrality of dialogue is obvious both in respect to the form or the framework of the P4C activities and in respect to their objectives. Evidently, the relation between the two levels is indissoluble, sience "the intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding

and in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and to act." (Isaacs, 1999)

Within the framework of the discussions about the "benefits" of the philosophy for children, we must remark the relevance of some of the most important theoreticians of dialogue, such as Martin Buber or David Bohm, but the names that could be mention in this respect are many more. Bohm's concept of dialogue, for instance, has a special relevance in theory of education, since for Bohm, the dialogue is not the simple process of sharing ideas and information, but designates the situation where the partners do something together, create something together, this creative dimension being essential for the Bohmian dialogue. (Bohm, 2003)

The Buberian theory of education must be understood in the terms of Buber's philosophy of dialogue, as a meeting, taking into account the distinction between the two fundamental words: I-Thou and I –It and the ontological character of Buber's concept of dialogue. (Buber, 1992) Another relevant distinction is made by Buber between two instincts witch mark, eventually, the main objectives of the educational process. First is the "child's creative capacity", the "originator instinct", the instinct to do things, to shape the world. But Buber contests the priority of this instinct in education, because it cannot lead to an experience that is indispensable for human life: to share and to enter in reciprocity. (Buber, 1947) For Buber, the demiurge instinct is not the only one, and for certain is not the most important objective that must be attained in the educational process. No matter how important the creative instinct is, the capacity to enter into a relation with the others remains the main human trait and, if education should action as the humanizing force in the individual's life, it must cultivate precisely the relational instinct. Buber's philosophical thought offers not a method, while there are attempts in this respect, but describes a direction in pedagogical theory. (Schilpp, 1967; Cohen, 1983)

This centrality of relation in Buberian thought explains the fundamental importance of Martin Buber in grounding the theory of care ethics. "Buber's explanation of relation, responsibility, and mutuality helps us understand ethical relations of respect and care, and indicates how we might develop virtues appropriate to encountering and listening to others." (Grams, 2019, 139) This is the foundation for a dialogical ethics of compromise, so necessary in a world that is primarily defined by the relation with the "difference" (Arnett, 2012).

Furthermore, the cultivation of a dialogic ethics becomes nowadays more than ever an essential skill, and we consider that P4C constitutes a special framework for fostering it. A dialogic ethics becomes "a pragmatic

necessity" in a world that is essentially marked by difference (Arnett, 2012) and it is consistent with empathy, trust and care. (Koehn, 2001) A dialogical attitude does not limit to responsiveness, but it includes a "specific kind of praxis" defined by "the willingness to risk change in one's one perspective" (Anderson et al., 2004) due to the encounter of alterity. Concerning this matter, there are studies that show the opportunity to investigate how a relational ethic can have a positive impact on how children and young people engage in communication. For instance, in the article "Applying a 'digital ethics of care' philosophy to understand adolescents' sense of responsibility on social media", O'Reilly et. all introduce the notion of "digital ethics of care" and demonstrate that adolescents use social media as a medium that can facilitate their care relationships. Further, they argue that "repositioning moral theory for congruence with a new digital society has valuable potential for the protection of adolescent mental health." (O'Reilly et al., 2021)

In the context of the digital, era this attitude in face of the other, described as the core of dialogue, is even more acutely needed. The online medium challenges even more the difficult conditions of dialogical encounters, given the technological characteristics of the medium which profoundly change the terms in which we understand control. These difficulties underline once again the fundamental role dialogue has to play in the educational process. And P4C activities contribute to the development of the abilities necessary to a dialogic attitude.

Therefore, this necessity to cultivate an ethic of dialogue has a special relevance also for the field of education, as one of most important questions that the educational system must answer nowadays is how to form individuals who are capable of functioning in a healthy and moral way in a world that is constantly changing and is defined by a permanent encounter with Alterity.

One of the authors that address these challenges faced by educators is Matthew Lipman, the founder of the P4C field. For Lipman, the introduction of philosophy in primary and secondary school curricula can contribute to making the education more critical, more creative and more caring. "The improvement of thinking involves the cultivation of its caring, critical, and creative dimensions, as well as of its reflective aspect. This brings us back to the question of what can be done to produce such thinking. What can be done to make education more critical, more creative, more caring, and more appraisive of its own procedures? My recommendation is that, as a start, we add philosophy to the elementary and secondary school curriculum." (Lipman, 2003, 27) In "Thinking in

education", Lipman describes, as opposed to the standard educational model, the "reflective paradigm of critical practice", outlining its essential features. This paradigm is defined by the setting up of a 'community of inquiry' based on dialogue where the teacher is not privileged through an authoritarian position. The primary goal of the process is the development of understanding and of 'good judgement' and not simply the accumulation of information. It is not so much the acquisition of information as the "understanding of relationships between and within the disciplines being studied". Such a process starts from the premise that the knowledge we possess is "equivocal, ambiguous, mysterious". (Lipman, 2003, 18) In addition to Lipman's direct references to Martin Buber and the Buberian concept of dialogue, it is interesting to consider his analysis of the setting in which philosophy is taught to children as a valid prototype of the community of inquiry. The importance of dialogue is emphasized by the main traits of the community of inquiry: inclusiveness, participation, the shared knowledge, face to face relationship, the search of the meaning, not in the form of assertive affirmations, but in the form of intellectual evolution, the feeling of social solidarity, etc. (Lipman, 2003)

There are approaches in the field of philosophy for children that explicitly draw attention to the importance of the dialogical dimension of P4C specific activities. Starting from Peter Worley's idea that philosophy for children possesses a "transformative power" capable of altering perspectives on everyday concepts without physical changes, Frunză et al. (2020) underline the fact that this transformation extends to both child and facilitator participants, leading to increased openness, tolerance, and critical thinking, promoting at the same time autonomy, particularly among children, as they engage in inner dialogues and contributing to the development of their moral autonomy, (Frunză et al., 2020, 298)

Frunză et al. (2020) emphasize that existing approaches in philosophy for children, like Matthew Lipman's "community of inquiry" and Peter Worley's "philosophical enquiry" primarily focus on the rational aspect of the educational process. Although they make efforts to integrate creative and caring dimensions, particularly Lipman, the authors believe that P4C activities should better emphasize the dialogical and relational aspects. In this respect, Frunză et al. (2020) consider that dialogue, as a more human-centered, could be explored as the core of the children philosophical communities. Considering the theoretical basis offered by the philosophy of dialogue, this approach focuses on the opportunity offered by the P4C field to create and foster a dialogical environment that is described by the authors as "communities of dialogue". (Frunză et al., 2020, 299)

Applying "communities of inquiry" in teaching communication ethics

In the following, starting from the point made in the first part of the paper, that there are important overlaps between the field of philosophy for children and the field of teaching ethics in communication, both in terms of basic principles and in terms of aims and intended competences, we propose a more practical perspective on the matter. The shared principles and significant emphasis on critical thinking and the cultivation of dialogue allow an exploration of how to incorporate the community of inquiry model into the methodology of teaching communication ethics.

It is important to draw a distinction between ethical education and moral education. The distinction between the two terms, ethics and morality, is evident and relevant here. If ethics is an academic discipline, morality is a concept that looks at the same object both from the perspective of the concrete life of the individual and of society. Although these concepts are closely interrelated, it is important to be aware of the different nuances in the pedagogical area also. These nuances stem mostly from the fact that, while ethical education has a more clearly defined place and role, moral education is much more slippery and raises more challenges and difficulties, both for the parties directly involved in the educational process, be it teachers, schools, children or parents, but also for society in the broad sense of the term. These issues concern first and foremost "the rights or duties of teachers to engage in educational activities that might work against the views of families or broader society". (Sprod, 2001, 3) Tim Sprod explains this difficulty through the use of two phrases which illustrate the ways the school influences the learner, which although distinct in themselves appear difficult to clearly distinguish. Firstly, there is the 'relatively moral shaping', which refers to the impact of the teacher's presence as such in the student's life and to matters relating to the school's organisational culture, and secondly there is the 'moral instruction', which refers to education and training in the classical sense of the terms, in the form of lectures and classes. (Sprod, 2001, 4) It is worth mentioning that this aspect of the educational process which focuses rather on "'receiving moral lessons' in a morally stimulating environment" (Ching-Sze Wang 2020, 16) is also a key aspect of activities specific for P4C. Recognizing the interdependence of both theoretical and practical dimensions is crucial. As Sprod (2001) points out, "the theoretical task of building a basis for ethics needs to be put to a practical test, while the practical task of creating ethical persons requires a theoretical justification." (Sprod, 2001, 5) Communities of inquiry model serves as a framework where this integration of theory and practice plays a central role.

Moreover, the connection between dialogue and the thinking process takes on particular nuances in both areas. This dialogic dimension of P4C-specific activities is closely related to the ability to reason in a way that avoids the ever-present trap of confusing rationalization with justification, which is an important goal of communication ethics teaching. (Ballard et al. 2014, 9) Of relevance here is David Bohm's view of the importance of dialogue in understanding how thinking works. And herein lies the stake of the Bohmian dialogue, namely that it changes the way we think by cultivating a proprioceptive movement of thought. That is to say, authentic dialogue with the other implies the awareness about our assumptions and prejudices and thus, it contributes to the accuracy of our way of thinking and to a healthier and more ethical relation with the other. Accordingly, practices that emphasize open dialogue, such as philosophy for children, play an essential role in cultivating moral proprioception and building moral character by encouraging independent questioning, critical thinking, and ethical action. (daVenza Tillmanns, 2021, 110)

Thus, our approach so far has aimed to highlight the specific elements of P4C area that are relevant for communication ethics pedagogy, such as critical thinking, enhancement of moral and cognitive autonomy, stimulation of moral imagination and openness to dialogue. These elements define the constitution of the specific area of philosophy for children. As we have seen, there are several perspectives on this subject, but all these elements, although perhaps valued differently, remain essential for defining the specific environment of the activities carried out in the field of philosophy for children, whether we are talking about "communities of inquiry" or about "communities of dialogue".

We are obviously aware that a university course does not provide the same learning conditions as a philosophy workshop for children, whether we refer to the framework of the educational process or to the amount of time at our disposal. Moreover, the process also involves an assessment of the student, which complicates the attempt to integrate P4C methods into the educational process. The issues of student assessment and grading may conflict with the p4c-specific approach, where the focus is on the development of the way the students reason, argue, dialogue, and not so much on the knowledge they acquire, which nevertheless remains an important element in teaching ethics.

Considering the fact that the complexity of moral theories is already an issue when we address the teaching of ethics in communication (Ballard et al., 2014), this problem is still relevant from the perspective that we propose, because the communities of inquiry are largely built on the input of

the students, who do not yet have the necessary understanding of ethical concepts and theories.

Another problematic aspect could be the challenge of maintaining a balance between freedom of expression and respect for others when dealing with sensitive topics, especially when considering that communication ethics often involves controversial topics that are difficult to avoid. It can be a challenge for the teacher to maintain an atmosphere of respect and civility because the community of inquiry model relies on a minimal, or at least discrete, presence of the facilitator.

Also, exploring ethical issues in the framework of a dialogue implied by P4C activities is often an uncomfortable task, because it requires self-examination and questioning of one's own beliefs and biases, plus there is always the risk already mentioned of confusion between rational thinking and rationalization.

Conclusion

Meeting these challenges calls for a combination of effective facilitation, careful curriculum design and a commitment to creating a dialogical and respectful learning environment. However, the communities of inquiry can be a very useful tool for teaching ethics, obviously accompanied or complemented by other methods. I consider that the creation of a space for dialogue, following the model of communities of inquiry, is absolutely necessary in order to meet the objectives that any course on communication ethics seeks to attain and to acquire the competences essential for a communication specialist. Thus, we believe that the specific practices of philosophy for children are an important source of methods and perspectives that can be useful in teaching ethics in communication, but also ethics in general, especially if we are talking about students who do not have a prior training in philosophy. Integrating philosophy for children practices and the communities of inquiry approach to ethics teaching offers a promising and innovative way to promote ethical and critical thinking development in students. This method goes beyond traditional teaching of ethical principles; rather, it engages students in thoughtful and open dialogues, encouraging them to explore complex moral issues, ethical dilemmas and theories.

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