

## A Framework for Dialogue within Service-Learning: Lessons from Philosophy for Children

**Jason Taylor**  
*University of Alberta*

This article argues that the field of community service-learning should adopt a “community of inquiry” model for classroom dialogue. Specifically, the author claims that communities of inquiry, as expounded by the Philosophy for Children movement, can help to overcome certain educational barriers that have been identified in both the theoretical and empirical service-learning literature by providing a general model for productive classroom dialogue. Moreover, this dialogical model, given its relative parsimony, promises to be amenable to many of the distinct (and potentially incompatible) theoretical models that inform service-learning approaches.

**Keywords:** service-learning, dialogue, theoretical model

Various theoretical underpinnings for service-learning—whether full-fledged frameworks, sketches of models, or loose theoretical connections—have been expounded in the literature (e.g., Butin, 2005, 2010; Cone & Harris, 1996; Deans, 1999; Kilgore, 1999; McMillan, 2009; Miettinen, 2000), each of which gives some pride of place to reflective writing. Few models, however, make explicit the importance of dialogue, with the notable exception of Cone and Harris (1996), who suggested that “there is an important role for a verbal and interactive reflective process that helps students test their thoughts in a marketplace of ideas” (p. 51). This absence is peculiar, given that service-learning classrooms—those physical and temporal spaces in which activities unfold week-by-week during the academic term—often involve a significant verbal component whereby students, in small or large groups, dialogue with one another in an attempt to create meaning from their out-of-class experiences. Such a lacuna is especially peculiar considering the essential importance service-learning academics place on providing a theoretical underpinning for the service-learning process.

The purpose of this article is to bring to the service-learning literature the theoretical model of the “community of inquiry” (CI), as conceptualized by the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement founded by Matthew Lipman.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the P4C community of inquiry method can help to overcome some of the educational barriers identified in both the theoretical and empirical service-learning literature by providing a general model for productive classroom dialogue. Moreover, this dialogical model—given its own (relative) theoretical parsimony—promises to be amenable to many of the distinct (potentially incompatible) theoretical models that inform various service-learning approaches.<sup>2</sup>

I begin the article by outlining the five-stage model for holding a classroom community of inquiry (Gregory, 2002, 2007a, 2008) and—drawing from the work of prominent authors (e.g., Gardner, 1995;

---

<sup>1</sup> In this article I speak of the CI as a classroom tool, despite the fact that others (e.g., Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980; Sharp, 1987) have referred to it as an environment or atmosphere in which education occurs. Thus, I treat the CI in ways that are perhaps more utilitarian than those authors would prefer.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously not all theoretical models of service-learning can be addressed in this article; rather, I focus on three distinct and diverse models. Similarly, I do not wish to suggest that the CI is not value-laden. In fact, incorporating P4C *is* value-laden in the sense that it relies on the acceptance of universal respect and inclusion (see Sprod, 2001, especially Ch. 4). It also presumes the value and indispensability of community-based learning—which squares neatly with the larger service-learning movement.

Sprod, 2001)—suggest how the method allows for theoretical parsimony. I then provide a brief overview of three distinct theoretical approaches that inform service-learning—à la John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Dan Butin—and describe how educators informed by that model might implement CIs. Next, I present two problems identified in the service-learning literature and demonstrate how certain stages of the CI model help address those problems. I conclude the article with a brief discussion of the limitations of the CI approach and the argument made herein, and speculate about one additional benefit—establishing a deeper, more meaningful connection between the community and the service-learning class—which might also be a fruit of the CI tree.

## Philosophy for Children and the Community of Inquiry

### History, Method, and Exposition

The Institute for the Advancement of the Philosophy for Children was founded in 1974 at Montclair State University by Matthew Lipman in response to his growing concern that college students were unable to think critically and dialogue effectively with one another. To encourage these capacities, Lipman wrote a “philosophical novel,” *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* (1969), to help stimulate classroom dialogue among pre-college adolescents. Since the publication of the novel, the P4C program has expanded rapidly to encompass 60 countries<sup>3</sup> and include participants of all ages<sup>4</sup> as a result of its innovative approach to fostering thoughtfulness, creativity, and compassion in individuals through the critical pursuit of answers to deep, troubling, philosophical questions.

It is possible, however, to separate the pursuit of philosophical questions and answers from the methodology at the core of the “community of inquiry” concept.<sup>5</sup> The CI is a student-centred pedagogy that encourages an atmosphere of equality and respect wherein participants are able to engage dialogically with their own ideas, while the instructor provides productive facilitation rather than instruction. Such facilitation helps participants to make judgments of their own, at their own pace, about issues determined or be or regarded as important by the group.<sup>6</sup>

Unpacking the methodology of the CI is no small task since all CIs are neither uniform nor homogeneous. Nevertheless, Gregory (2008) articulated a useful 5-stage “formula,” or framework, for the community of inquiry.<sup>7</sup> In the first stage, the facilitator offers some stimulus material from which participants create an agenda, usually centred on participant-created questions (stage 2), and about which they hold a dialogue (stage 3). Finally, the facilitator guides participants through a reflective assessment of the entire process (stage 4), raising questions meant to focus specifically on occurrences within the dialogue, and then implements follow-up activities (stage 5) to solidify the skills or knowledge that can be taken away from the entire process (Gregory, 2008).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, <http://p4c.ualberta.ca/> and <http://www.montclair.edu/cehs/academics/centers-and-institutes/iapc/> for additional information.

<sup>4</sup> Many of my university students find the CI method routine; I have hosted bi-weekly meetings with senior centres which featured the methodology as well; and I am the director of a summer camp, Eurekcamp, which hosts campers between the ages of 5 and 14 years.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, for this author, the line separating “philosophical” and “non-philosophical” is not hard and fast.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the role of the facilitator, see Kennedy (2004).

<sup>7</sup> As Gregory (2008) advised, this framework should be viewed as a “recipe,” which needs first to be “mastered” before being “varied” (p. 9). I would echo this advice for those taking up this methodology in service-learning contexts.

<sup>8</sup> In the interest of space, I omit discussion of the fifth stage. While important, this stage is very similar to the methods already employed by many service-learning instructors who, for instance, give “ink-shed,” “free-writing,” or “reflection” assignments, which ask students to solidify their understanding from classes or community experiences in a written form.

These stages can be fleshed out by considering some particulars from typical P4C sessions used with my first-year philosophy students, in classes which include a service-learning component.<sup>9</sup> In those classes, students are responsible for visiting a public school or Catholic school classroom on six to eight occasions to provide 60-minute P4C lessons based on the picture-book method pioneered by Wartenberg (2009).<sup>10</sup> Given the initial reluctance of the first-year students to engage in the P4C process, I run “mirror sessions” each week using a new stimulus during our own classroom time. Thus, I read students the short picture book *Frederick*, by Leo Lionni, as the shared stimulus material, and advise them beforehand to simply “pay attention to what the book makes them think of” (stage 1).<sup>11</sup>

In pairs, students share what they find interesting about the book or what thoughts it conjured, and then (stage 2) they collaborate to formulate a question for discussion which is shared with the group. Questions commonly submitted included, “Was Frederick working?”; “Is all work equally valuable?”; “Why didn’t Frederick help the other mice?”; “Is poetry work?”; “Can you be doing nothing and still be working?”; and, “Why do people write poetry?”<sup>12</sup>

Question formation—a crucial component toward identifying student interests—follows a set of criteria, which are either given prior or (preferably) discovered by students in earlier classes. Thus, in my P4C sessions, the first visit is nearly always a session on different types of questions, with an emphasis on the fact that different questions can be used for different, sometimes overlapping, ends.<sup>13</sup> Questions that are good for discussion are: (a) central, in the sense that the questions and answers that might be derived are meaningful to those who take part in the dialogue; (b) contestable, in that there are multiple answers which might be reasonably defended; and (c) answerable,<sup>14</sup> in that the group participating in the discussion can reasonably evaluate the answers and reasons that have been defended—or, in the very least, participants are able to determine that some positions have better rationales than others (Sprod, 2001).<sup>15</sup>

As a final task in stage 2, the group works together to organize the newly created questions (and sometimes to adjudicate whether they meet the established standards). Oftentimes the organization process results in questions being grouped according to their importance, or questions the answers to which depend on answers to other questions listed; however, the group is typically given the freedom to organize them as they see fit. Whatever order is determined, the question regarded as the most important to participants is usually addressed first. For example, referring to the questions listed earlier, “Is poetry work?” appears before “Was Frederick working?”—the former needing an answer in order for the latter

<sup>9</sup> In fact, it was this course that led ultimately to this article; in that class, I began to notice the usefulness of the P4C methodology in service-learning courses.

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see [www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org](http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org), which contains hundreds of lesson plan ideas for children’s picture books.

<sup>11</sup> For those unfamiliar with the story, Frederick is a field mouse who is also an artist. As winter approaches, he spends his time “gathering” sun rays, words, and colors while the other mice gather supplies such as food. The mice question Frederick’s contribution because he appears only to be sitting and not really working. Winter comes and, inevitably, supplies run out; the mice question Frederick about his “supplies,” and Frederick is revealed to be “a poet” and artist, bringing warmth, color, and words to the other mice.

<sup>12</sup> Again, see <http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Frederick> for more examples of questions.

<sup>13</sup> Consider seven different ends for which questions can be used: We can ask questions to gain information (“Do you want a coffee?”); to discover underlying assumptions (“Do you think a fetus is a person?”); to build a connection with someone (“How was your day, today?”); to learn how to plan ahead (“What’s the weather going to be like tomorrow?”); to persuade others (“You’re not wearing *that* shirt out, are you?”); to begin a negotiation (“Where do you want to go for dinner?”); or, to begin an inquiry or dialogue (“What does it mean to love someone?”).

<sup>14</sup> For Sprod, as well as in my own view, what is aimed at here is not capital “T” truth but instead intersubjective agreement. As such, the determination by the group at the end of discourse is always open for re-examination if new reasons or evidence should come to light (see also footnote 15).

<sup>15</sup> See also Gregory (2008, pp. 25-27), who phrases these less explicitly, speaking instead in terms of how the goals of discussion dictate the kind of question that one ought to formulate. The standards presented here relate to dialogue which aims at discovering “truths.”

to be answered. Yet, the former question seems also to be related to “Why do people write poetry?”, though not in the previous relation of dependence.

Once questions have been organized, dialogue on the chosen question or priority begins (stage 3). Participants take turns contributing answers, justifying their claims when necessary. Routinely, especially when this process is used in a P4C setting, I employ a visual cue system, which aids participants and the facilitator in understanding upcoming comments and situating suggestions within the overall arc of the dialogue.<sup>16</sup> During this process, the facilitator plays a central role in regulating the process of dialogue. Thus, he or she solicits answers and supporting reasons, helps the group seek examples and counter-examples, identifies assumptions that the group may have missed, connects various ideas with the participants who offered them, outlines tensions between ideas and answers, or asks who agrees or disagrees (e.g., see Gardner, 1995; Gregory, 2008, especially Ch. 3; Sprod, 2001, especially Ch. 7 and 8). Importantly, the contributions made by the instructor, *qua* facilitator, are not content-driven; rather, the content is determined by the participants.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the best CIs, in my opinion, are those in which even control of who speaks next is delegated largely to the participants. In this approach, the facilitator does not control the process but rather guides it.<sup>18</sup>

Following the dialogue is a reflective process (stage 4) which aims to provide immediate feedback from the group on the entire CI to that point. Anything is an appropriate topic for reflection, though oftentimes the facilitator poses directed questions. In my P4C sessions, I typically ask students to assess the ways in which the individuals or the group was thinking creatively (e.g., “Can you name one instance where someone raised an idea you had never thought of before?”); thinking critically (e.g., “How did the group do at considering counter-examples?”); and being “community-minded” (e.g., “How did the group do at ensuring everyone who wanted to speak had a turn to do so?”)—eliciting visual responses when possible.<sup>19</sup>

## Communities of Inquiry: Respect and Reflection

A closer examination of stages 2 and 3 begins to reveal the underlying theoretical assumptions underlying CIs. To begin, the CI carries with it the importance of anchoring the educative process in student interests. By encouraging students to set the agenda and be the primary contributors in a dialogue, educators aim to ensure participant engagement in ways that allow dialogue and its conclusions to be more personally meaningful to participants themselves:

In this context, to be personally meaningful means both that the person making the judgment has found her own way to it—that it is genuinely felt; that it constitutes an occasion of self-correction rather than of external correction—and also that the judgment is expressive of aspects of her personhood; is relevant to her personal experience. (Gregory, 2008, p. 20)

---

<sup>16</sup> Thus, for instance, instead of raising hands, students indicate their desire to speak by placing one or two fingers into the circle. “One-finger” contributions are new ideas which are on topic but have yet to be considered by the group; “two-finger” contributions are “building ideas,” which ask for clarification, provide examples of counter-examples, or draw out implications from the person who just contributed.

<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, however, the facilitator may interject some content, but in my view this is only justified if he or she does so out of concern for the process, i.e., if motivated by the meta-considerations about the dialogue in general. Thus, the facilitator may ask for clarity or summaries (or provide them him or herself), seek an example, or request a response from the previous speaker, for example. Regardless, each is done with concern, ultimately, for the process of the dialogue. See Gregory (2008).

<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that the facilitator is unnecessary. Indeed, as Sprod (2001) argued—and as empirical studies have shown (e.g., Gregory, 2007b; Gustafson et al., 2000; Sotor et al., 2008)—the instructor who acts as a facilitator is a crucial component of any successful CI.

<sup>19</sup> For this, I use a “thumbs-in”—with verbal justification—method. A “thumbs up” indicates a positive assessment; “thumbs down” a negative assessment; and “thumbs sideways” a moderate assessment (i.e., “good but could have been better”).

This passage reveals one of the minimal fundamental theoretical assumptions of the CI: Self-correction in light of the comments, reasons, and views of others—revealed through dialogue—is not possible without an atmosphere of respect and inclusivity (Sprod, 2001). That is, in order for participants to openly assess their own positions and reasons relative and in contrast to those of others, the CI must operate on “some substantive moral principle of [universal] respect ... where ‘universal’ minimally includes all humans who are capable of representing their own interests” (Sprod, 2001, p. 123).<sup>20</sup>

Despite the importance of outlining this minimal aspect, one ought not to overlook the importance that careful reflection plays in the methodology of the CI. This is perhaps most obvious in the fourth stage of the CI (a significant component of the process that should never be skipped without a justifiable and deliberate reason for doing so), in which students are asked to think explicitly about their thinking. It is during this stage of careful, thoughtful reflection on both one’s own contribution to the process as well as the overall dynamic of the group that the entire process improves and that communities of inquiry are formed. My experience, though anecdotal, supports these claims:<sup>21</sup> For example, participants of all ages often moderate the dialogue after the fact (e.g., by suggesting that two people only picked their friends, passing over new contributors); introduce new visual cues that help to organize contributions more obviously (e.g., signs indicating that participants are equivocating); or laud participants for contributing an idea that changed the tenure of the discussion dramatically.

Reflection is an important part of the earlier stages as well, from the presentation of the stimulus right through to the dialogue. At each stage, participants are drawn (by the facilitator) to notice their own thoughts, be explicit about their reasons and arguments, and actively test whether responses meet criteria which they themselves have chosen. One might say, then, that the CI method is reflectively “saturated.”

## **Community Service-Learning: Canvassing Theoretical Models**

Here, I offer a brief sketch of three different theoretical models presented in the literature in order to demonstrate how the model for CIs might be incorporated into each. While this is obviously not an exhaustive account of service-learning theories, it illustrates the potential and flexibility of using the P4C model within the service-learning context.

### **Experience and Dewey**

Both P4C and the service-learning movement can be understood as having their roots in the work of John Dewey, so it is not surprising that the two are compatible. In fact, given the overlap, I will shorten my exposition to the most salient ways in which Dewey’s tenets inform service-learning theory. As Thomas Deans (1999) reported, Dewey’s approach to education was one which ultimately aimed to bridge the “dualisms” of “knowledge to action, and individual to society” (p. 16), as arising from his (Dewey’s) “invest[ment] in reform, in ‘social reconstruction,’ [rather] than evolutionary change,” and as brought about by agents such as teachers and administrators who connected to civic life (p. 19). The core feature in this form of education is the ideal of democracy, which is “a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience” (p. 19), with service to the community as a key component. According to this approach, youth notice and develop interests in that which is practically based and in establishing and maintaining “social order and progress” (p. 19).

Dewey’s 5-stage model of reflective inquiry informs service-learning in some instances. He suggested that educators should provide experiences in which students (1) experience some form of doubt, (2) offer tentative interpretations of the experience, (3) (re-)consider the facts at hand for further clarification, (4) adjust the hypothesis formulated in stage 2, and (5) test and apply the adjusted hypothesis as appropriate (Deans, 1999). Such a model is both reflective and fit for the incorporation of the CI as articulated within

---

<sup>20</sup> As such, CIs are ideally undertaken on the assumption that anyone capable of discourse is an important and welcome participant.

<sup>21</sup> Similar, empirically based views can be found in Gregory (2007b), Sotor et al. (2008), and Sprod (2001).

P4C. Thus, incorporating CIs into a service-learning context that relies on such a theoretical background is of little difficulty. Indeed, one fundamental theoretical underpinning of CIs—universal respect—is already and always part of the ideal democratic society toward which Dewey thought educational pursuits ought to aim. The two, then, are happy bedfellows.

## Critical Pedagogy and Freire

In contrast with Dewey, Paulo Freire thought that education ought to aim for “radical structural change [which is] more politically oppositional and more attuned to both class conflict and cultural diversity” (Deans, 1999, p. 20). In this light, service-learning is less attentive to culture and democracy than it is to political power, power imbalances, race, and racial oppression. It sees the educational pursuit as one which provides students with experiences that produce for them an “increasingly reflective, abstract and critical grasp on [their] social, historical, and class situatedness.... Thus, service-learning projects which pair critical consciousness aims with concrete social action, are a fitting manifestation of Freire’s theory in practice” (p. 22).

From this standpoint, CIs can easily find their place in the classroom through guided reflection on service-learning placements—that is, with the instructor situating the placement as the stimulus for discussion. While that is true of all placements—which can be used as stimuli for discussion—it is especially so for the students who share experiences in spaces saturated with overt and covert social forces. Inquiry, in that context, could focus on providing a venue for students to identify and work through these underlying forces, and experienced facilitators may choose to forgo the “question creation” process (stage 2) of the CI in order to directly introduce central questions concerning these issues.<sup>22</sup>

## Anti-Foundationalism and Butin

Dan Butin (2010), responding to Stanley Fish’s (2003, 2004) concerns that service-learning has a partisan (liberal) agenda defended an “anti-foundational” form of service-learning. In contrast to technical, cultural, or political frameworks, Butin (2005) suggested that “the value of [the anti-foundational framework] ... is the lack of a normative or teleological framework (i.e., a standard, ‘normal,’ or presumed vision of what service-learning is/should be) and the disentangling of the multiple and usually conflated goals of service-learning” (p. 90). This conception of service-learning holds that “there is no neutral, objective, or contentless ‘foundation’ by which we can ever know the ‘truth’ unmediated by our own particular condition” (Butin, 2010, p. 12). Service-learning proceeds, instead, on a “justice in doubt” mindset which aims to disrupt the “unacknowledged binaries that guide much of our day-to-day thinking and acting to open up the possibility that how we originally viewed the world may be too simplistic or stereotypical” (p. 13). Under such a framework, service-learning becomes what Butin called a “strategy” employed by the instructor as a tool for disruption and disturbance, and is the means by which one can begin to understand the relations between teaching, learning, and the community (pp. 14-19).<sup>23</sup>

Enacted in this context, the CI can be very powerful because it provides the means, method, and space for identifying and addressing the very points which service-learners find disturbing or uprooting, while providing an environment—grounded in respect and inclusion—that can offer comfort and familiarity in times of distress. Moreover, as the students voice their reflections from their service-learning experiences, the facilitator is able to identify commonalities, contentions, and other connections among those reflections which in turn helps to solidify the group as a group, further enabling each member to grapple with not only his or her own disruptions, but the disruptions experienced by others. That is, the CI provides the perfect tool for raising and addressing the “remainders”—those features that

<sup>22</sup> I have often adopted this strategy, especially in my upper-level community service-learning Theory and Practice classes, where I introduce weekly questions to which students formulate answers prior to that week’s class. This allows every student to contribute during CIs but also gives the facilitator time to anticipate ways in which the discussion might be pushed deeper in the coming weeks.

<sup>23</sup> Notice here as well the links to Dewey’s account of education, discussed earlier in this article.

grow from service-learning yet are unanticipated by the instructor who assigned the service-learning opportunity—to which service-learning gives rise (Butin, 2010, p. 46).<sup>24</sup>

## Applications

As I have suggested, structured classroom CIs can be assimilated into various theoretical service-learning frameworks with little modification to the favoured service-learning model. However, there are other benefits, I think, to employing the CI in service-learning contexts. Here, I examine two issues that have been raised in the literature and explore, briefly, how the CI methodology might help to remedy those issues. The first relates to Susan Jones' (2002) concern about the “underside” of service-learning. I argue that an appeal to the power of the third stage—dialogue— and its relation to the Vygotskian notion of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) can alleviate her (and others') concerns about students who “don't get it.” Second, Keith Morton (1995), in his “The Irony of Service-Learning,” suggested a shift in perception of service-learning practice. He proposed that the service-learning agenda should be conceived of under the guise of paradigms, rather than a spectrum, that instructors seek to “thicken.” In this case, I appeal not only to the third stage (dialogue) and the ZPD, but also to the second stage— question development—as a primary identification tool which can be leveraged by instructors for Morton's purpose.

## Overcoming the Unknown

The first issue that the model of dialogue can help to ameliorate is the so-called “underside” of service-learning (Jones, 2002), which reveals that there are students who “don't get it... [They] appear in class thinking they are going to receive easy credit for volunteering or are using the class as a resume builder” (p. 11). The result, once students understand that much more than volunteering is involved, is that students “distance themselves from both the service experience and in-class learning” and find course work to be “repetitive” and unconnected to their service experience (p. 11). Typically, these students do not see their experience as anything more than one whereby, for instance, they provide out of class tutoring for those less fortunate than they are.<sup>25</sup>

The “don't get it” students, Jones (2002) proposed, are a product of three factors: (1) students' background, (2) their developmental readiness, and (3) privileging conditions. Addressing or overcoming the “doesn't-get-it-ness,” Jones suggested, requires the instructor to “bridge build” (p. 14) while paying particular attention to and respecting both the growth that is hoped for and the developmental readiness of the student. This is, then, a “student-specific” process; it is labour intensive in that no “cookie cutter” approach can be applied given the differences that exist from student to student.<sup>26</sup>

Implementing directed, purposeful dialogue, as is found in the CI model, can help to alleviate the “doesn't get it” issue in at least two ways. First, by engaging in dialogue in which participants are responsible for the creation of the central questions and the overall agenda (stage 2), students are likely to reveal their own positional background and privileging conditions to the instructor (as well as the rest of

---

<sup>24</sup> An example of a remainder offered by Butin: math students were responsible for tutoring under-privileged youth. The assignment was intended to help students better understand the mathematical concepts in play. Yet, students return to class with decidedly non-mathematical anecdotes; for instance they query why young girls are less interested in math than the boys, or why the supervisor of the sign seems to be overly apathetic. The instructor, in such cases, is obliged to address the issues despite the fact that they are outside the domain to which he intended to give rise.

<sup>25</sup> The problem of “getting it” runs even deeper, for there are often those students who “get it” but who are unable to reveal their depth of understanding to the instructor. Jones (2002) reported of one student whose learning was deep, effective, and purposeful as she grappled with patients afflicted with the AIDs virus, but who was unable—until explicitly prodded—to accurately reveal her understanding and struggles (in an e-mail).

<sup>26</sup> Jones (2002) herself recognised this when she suggested, for instance, that instructors need to take care not to assume that all students enter the classroom with the same background, privileges, and experiences.

the group), especially if they are called upon to treat the community placement projects as “stimuli” (stage 1). Such information can be used by the instructor to adjust existing exercises, questions, and prompts to be completed as the course moves forward.

Second, and more importantly, there are good reasons to believe that participation in structured purposeful dialogue (stage 3) with one’s peers allows one to learn in ways that otherwise would have been unavailable. That is, communities of inquiry help to produce the conceptual reasoning space which Lev Vygotsky labeled the “zone of proximal development” (as quoted in Sprod, 2001, p. 50), a reasoning or thinking space in which students are able to operate while in a group but not while alone. Thus, CIs allow students to “engage verbally in a social group in forms of reasoning [and reflection] that are not yet available to them individually” (Sprod, 2001, p. 49). Regarding Jones’ (2002) concerns about students “not getting it,” then, the CI can help to connect those who do get it to those who do not, and facilitate connections between them which deepen the understanding of those who do not get it.

## Deepening the Paradigms

Keith Morton (1995) suggested that the common understanding of service-learning—which portrays the service-learning class as a pursuit to move students along a continuum, from a charity toward a social change perspective—is one that threatens to alienate a number of students who enter such classes with a stalwart commitment to the charitable view of service. This is so, he suggested, because the “progress along a continuum” view of service-learning is partisan in that it presumes liberal democratic values for which the importance of social change is primary. In such a context, those with a charity focus may not buy into the importance of that partisan view. Ironically, viewing service-learning as an attempt to make progress along a spectrum ignores the fact that the specific views which students hold when entering a service-learning class are themselves “based upon distinct world views, ways of identifying and addressing problems, and long-term visions of individual and community transformation” (Morton, 1995, p. 21); moreover, this approach threatens to alienate dedicated service-learners who do not identify with the instructor’s underlying values.

Accordingly, Morton (1995) recommended that educators reject the spectrum view of service-learning and adopt instead the “paradigm view.” Specifically, he identified three paradigms—charity, project, and social change—outlining distinct features for each. While those differences are not relevant to the purposes of this article, it should be obvious that under this shift the successful service-learning class can no longer be conceived of as one which moves student views from one conception to another. Instead, he proposed that paradigms be deepened or “thickened” in an effort to motivate student:

Thick versions of each paradigm are grounded in deeply held, internally coherent values; match means and ends; describe a primary way of interpreting and relating to the world; offer a way of defining problems and solutions; and suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like. (Morton, 1995, p. 28)

If one take’s Morton seriously and aims to thicken paradigms for students rather than move them along a spectrum, then one might wonder how this is possible. Again, one might lean on the strength of dialogue, which creates a ZPD in which students can begin to assess the “thickness” of their viewpoints. Perhaps more important, however, is the value of instructors adopting the process-focused role of facilitation (rather than instruction). Such a role, as Gardner (1995) indicated, does not merely make space for dialogue but also pushes students deeper, to be mindful of the direction of dialogue. Under such conditions, the facilitator helps to ensure that the dialogue progresses toward ‘truth’ (Gardner, 1995). Examples of good facilitation, given the understanding of “thick paradigms,” include the facilitator having (or developing) a keen eye for consistency, clarity, connections, and efficacy. Mindfulness of these aspects helps students to continue to develop paradigms which they are already naturally inclined to adopt, and overcomes the irony of service-learning.



## Conclusion

Before recounting an additional advantage of implementing this model of inquiry into the service-learning classroom, it is important to note two limitations of the approach championed here. First, adopting the proposed model would make dialogue a central component of the service-learning classroom. Such a move can be stressful for students who are not used to speaking in class or who are particularly introverted. Of course, there are strategies for accommodating students with these needs, including: (1) “think, pair, share,” whereby students begin by thinking on their own (often in writing), pairing up and discussing those reflections, and then sharing them with the larger group; (2) “gallery walks,” in which multiple pieces of chart paper, each with one unique reflection question written on it, are placed throughout the classroom and students are then tasked with writing responses (in silence) to each of them (and occasionally they are invited to respond to other students’ answers); and (3) “silent discussions,” in which multiple pieces of chart paper are joined to form one larger piece that is then distributed to groups of four to six students, who then use that paper to “discuss” the central question, in silence, entirely in writing.<sup>27</sup> Each of these strategies (along with others) can help to accommodate introverted students who might find in-class discussion stressful.

Yet, regardless of the context in which this model of dialogue is used, there is one underlying concern which these strategies cannot address: It can often be uncomfortable or disarming to engage in dialogue about one’s own beliefs. That is, given the student-driven nature of the discussion questions, any dialogue can be potentially unsettling for participants as their peers or they themselves point out underlying inconsistencies in their views, or as they realize other novel insights that had gone previously unrecognized. Though the process of self-realization is often positive, it can also be uncomfortable, and instructors should be mindful that having one’s ideas or central personal views challenged can be a difficult situation with which to cope. This is exacerbated, of course, by the content of some service-learning courses, which often ask students to confront social inequalities, so instructors of service-learning courses must be alert to this possibility.

Also, the current model for CIs requires that service-learning instructors shift their concern from content-related contributions typical of the standard “lecture style” class to those of process-related contributions such as those which ask students to evaluate reasons, give examples, connect their ideas to those of others, or draw insights from their understanding of the course material. The limitation here is that, under such an approach, explicit instruction runs counter to the aim of inquiry; accordingly, CIs cannot be the sole means of engaging students, their ideas, and the class readings. Sometimes, instructors might need to explicitly inform students about what an author means by his or her argument before inquiring with students about whether we should accept that argument as persuasive.

This article provides a sense of not only what the model of a CI should look like, but also how such a model might be incorporated into the theoretical stances that already inform instructors’ approaches to service-learning. Moreover, it also highlights the benefits and limitations of such an incorporation. In relation to the benefits, it would seem that large-picture implementation of the CI method—should one accept the value of the model outlined here and take seriously the claims of P4C practitioners (e.g., Gardner, 1995; Gregory, 2007a, 2008; Lipman et al., 1980)—would require the provision of training and practical opportunities for instructors to implement these skills. Ideally, such training is best if supplemented by regular meetings of a community of inquiry among the service-learning instructors who themselves implement CIs in the classroom. Such a holistic approach, as advocated by Gregory (2008), provides the needed support—“troubleshooting group” for in-class remainders—and the means for developing dialogue and argumentation skills that promise to optimize the good CIs offer to service-learning.

---

<sup>27</sup> I first learned of this third strategy at the 2012 North American Association for the Community of Inquiry (NAACI) annual conference, from a presentation by my colleagues at the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO).

Indeed, I think one final advantage on which educators can capitalize in their service-learning classes follows directly from the theoretical underpinning of Cis—universal respect and inclusivity—as well as the holism endorsed by Gregory (2008). If one take these features seriously, then CIs should not be restricted to dialogue among those in the classroom (students); rather, all those who are willing to abide by the respect due to the manner of inquiry are welcome to participate in the dialogue. Accordingly, community partners, a group whose voice has only recently begun to be heard (e.g., see d’Arlach et al., 2009; Worrall, 2007), might join the dialogue expanding further the zone of proximal development for students and instructors alike.

### Author Note

Jason Taylor, Department of Philosophy, University of Alberta.

### Correspondence

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Jason Taylor, Adjunct Instructor, Department of Philosophy, University of Alberta, 2-40 Assiniboia Hall, Edmonton, AB T6G 2E7, Canada. Email: [jdtaylor@ualberta.ca](mailto:jdtaylor@ualberta.ca)

### References

- Butin, D. (2005). Service-learning as postmodern pedagogy. In D. Butin (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education* (pp. 89-104). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Butin, D. (2010). *Service-learning in theory and practice: The future of community engagement in higher education*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cone, D., & Harris, S. (1996). Service learning practice: Developing a theoretical framework. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, 3, 31-43.
- d’Arlach, L., Sanchez, B., & Feuer, R. (2009). Voices from the community: A case for reciprocity in service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16(1), 5-16.
- Deans, T. (1999). Service-learning in two keys: Paulo Friere’s critical pedagogy in relation to John Dewey’s pragmatism. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 6(1), 15-29.
- Fish, S. (2003, May 16). Aim low. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49(36), C5.
- Fish, S. (2004, May 21). Why we built the ivory tower. *New York Times*, A23.
- Gardner, S. (1995). Inquiry is no mere conversation (or discussion or dialogue): Facilitation of inquiry is hard work! *Analytic Teaching*, 16(2), 102-111.
- Gregory, M. (2002). Constructivism, standards, and the classroom community of inquiry. *Educational Theory*, 52(4), 397-408.
- Gregory, M. (2007a). Normative dialogue types in philosophy for children. *Gifted Education International*, 22, 160-171.
- Gregory, M. (2007b). Thirty years of philosophical and empirical research in philosophy for children: An overview. *Diotime: Revue Internationale de Didactique de la Philosophie*, 34, 1-13.
- Gregory, M. (2008). *Philosophy for Children: Practitioner’s handbook*. Montclair, NJ: Montclair State University, Institute for the Advancement of the Philosophy for Children.
- Gustafson, P., & Gibbs, D. (2000). Guiding or hiding? The role of the facilitator in online teaching and learning. *Teaching Education*, 11(2), 195-210.
- Jones, S. (2002). The underside of service learning. *About Campus*, 7(4), 10-15.
- Kennedy, D. (2004). The role of a facilitator in a community of philosophical inquiry. *Metaphilosophy*, 33(5), 744-765.
- Kilgore, D. (1999). Understanding learning in social movements: A theory of collective learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(3), 191-202.

- Lipman, M. (1969). *Harry Stottlemeier's discovery*. Montclair, NJ: Montclair State University, Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children.
- Lipman, M., Sharp, A. M., & Oscanyan, F. S. (1980). *Philosophy in the classroom*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McMillan, J. (2009). Through an activity theory lens: Conceptualizing service-learning as “boundary work”. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Engaged Research*, 2, 39-60.
- Morton, K. (1995). The irony of service: Charity, project, and social change in service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2(1), 19-32.
- Miettinen, R. (2000). The concept of experiential learning and John Dewey's theory of reflective thought and action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(1), 54-72.
- Sharp, A. M. (1987). What is a community of inquiry? *Journal of Moral Education*, 16(1), 37-45.
- Sotor, A. O., Wilkinson, I. A., Murphy, P. K., Rudge, L., Reninger, K., & Edwards, M. (2008). What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47, 372-391.
- Sprod, T. (2001). *Philosophical discussion in moral education: The community of ethical inquiry*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Wartenberg, T. (2009). *Big ideas for little kids: Teaching philosophy through children's literature*. New York: R&L Education.
- Worrall, L. (2007). Asking the community: A case study of community partner perspectives. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(1), 5-17.

