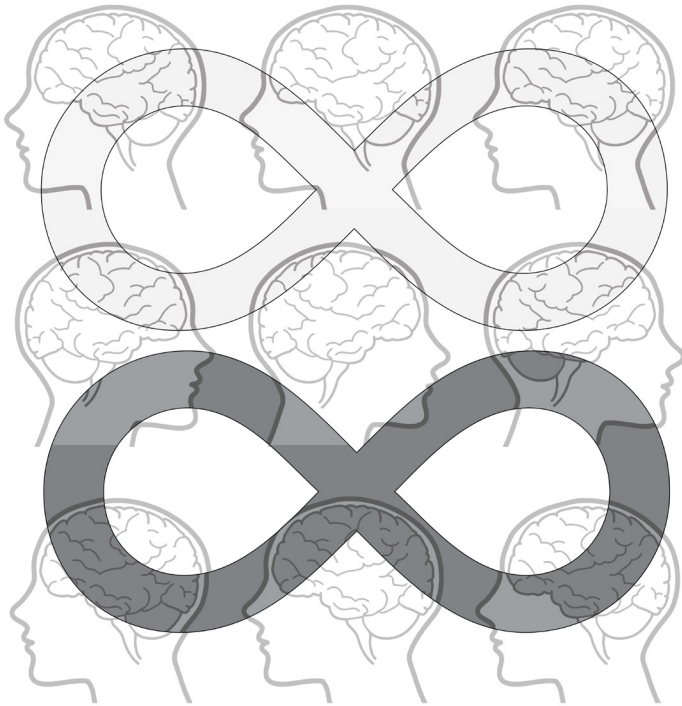


AUTISTIC STUDENTS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY



ABSTRACT

The standard pedagogy within Philosophy for Children courses is the community of inquiry. In this paper, I argue that the current form of the community of inquiry does not properly accommodate autistic students. Using observations from Benjamin Lukey alongside my personal testimony, I illustrate how autistic students may struggle within the community of inquiry. Importantly, I argue that this need not be the case, as the community of inquiry can be made more inclusive if it were to emphasize collaboration instead of verbal dialogue.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Following the work of Matthew Lipman, the standard pedagogy within Philosophy for Children (P4C) courses is the community of inquiry (COI).¹ This pedagogy encourages students (most commonly at the elementary level) to collaborate as equals within a dialogical exploration of some democratically chosen question. While the COI offers a more liberatory learning environment than traditional pedagogies, it is not as inclusive as it could be. For example, autistic students who find it difficult to verbally articulate their views may seemingly exhibit a lack of participation. It is my contention that, in its present form, the COI does not properly accommodate autistic students, but this does not imply that autistic students are unable to obtain a philosophical education. It is also worth noting that, while I am focusing on autistic students, they are not the only individuals who may benefit from my suggestions.

In the following section, I will briefly describe the COI as well as the verbal, social, and sensory phenomena that autistic people may experience. Then, I will use both Benjamin Lukey's observations as well as my own testimony as an autistic person to show how one might argue that, because some autistic students struggle to participate within the COI, they are exempt from a philosophical education.² In the second section, I claim that this constructed argument fails. To do so, I will firstly use work from Margaret Price to suggest that the COI would be far more inclusive if it focused on collaboration instead of verbal dialogue. Secondly, I insist that even if the current COI requires verbal dialogue, many other methods of philosophizing do not. Following my recommendations, I conclude by responding to the objection that verbal dialogue is indispensable to philosophy courses. In the same vein, I respond to the objection that collaborative students must eventually communicate with one another. Finally, I briefly comment on the idea that doing philosophy necessarily requires properties that some students may lack.

1 Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
 2 Since I will be using my personal testimony, it is also important to note that I am not the voice of the autistic community—my experience is not the autistic experience.

II. AUTISTIC STUDENTS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

According to Lipman, the COI must have an aim, a sense of direction, and a dialogical structure.³ For example, the facilitator commonly reads a short story to a circle of students, which inspires them to ask many philosophical questions. The students then democratically choose which question they will collectively pursue. However, the COI is not merely a mutual sharing of opinions. As Lipman notes, a dialogue is the inverse of a conversation, as a dialogue emphasizes logical moves over personal remarks.⁴ A successful COI will consist of students engaging in a back-and-forth motion, building upon, and responding to the comments of their peers with the goal of developing a greater understanding of the chosen subject. Thus, the COI is almost entirely based on peer-to-peer verbal communication. Importantly, it demands precise verbal inputs that directly and logically follow from another student's comments.

Conversely, according to the DSM-5, autistic people show noticeable "deficits" in social communication.⁵ Deficits include difficulty developing and understanding social relationships, interpreting body language, and "failure of normal back-and-forth conversation."⁶ Furthermore, autistic individuals commonly exhibit repetitive behaviors and routines, with an insistence on sameness.⁷ Additionally, many autistic people have special interests: intense dedication and strong attachment to some object or idea.⁸ Finally, the sensory experience of autistic individuals often differs from the average person. For example, heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli is not uncommon, causing some sensations to be overstimulating and uncomfortable.⁹

It is not difficult, then, to imagine how an autistic student may face unique challenges within the COI. During his time teaching philosophy to autistic students, Lukey noted (in the only paper on the intersection between autism and P4C that I am aware of) that they were largely uninterested in the comments of their peers, rarely asked questions out of curiosity, and lacked any signs of caring whether or not their comments were understood.¹⁰ With regard to the aforementioned description of

3 Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 83–4.

4 Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 87.

5 American Psychiatric Association. *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5*. (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 50.

6 APA, *DSM-5*, 50.

7 APA, *DSM-5*, 50.

8 APA, *DSM-5*, 50.

9 APA, *DSM-5*, 50.

10 Benjamin Lukey, "Rethinking Dialogue: Reflections on P4C with Autistic Children," *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* 17, no. 1-2 (2004): 28.



the COI, Lukey concluded that “there was no community of inquiry, and it was not in the process of being formed.”¹¹ It seems clear from his testimony that the students were struggling with the communicative skills that the COI demands. In addition to struggling with communicative skills, autistic students may also find the sensory atmosphere of the COI to be troubling. While sitting in a circle with their peers, autistic students are forced to comprehend a plethora of sensory data at once. In particular, being expected to engage in face-to-face interaction with multiple peers may be daunting.

Lukey’s explanation of the struggles an autistic student may face within the COI generally aligns with my childhood experiences. Before I began to grasp the patterns of conversation, my strategy was to remain silent. During one parent-teacher conference, my teacher explained that, upon hearing a student speaking out of turn, she prepared herself to scold them—only to be overjoyed when she discovered that it was me. I would like to think that the younger version of myself would have appreciated the COI, but I know that I would not have contributed. As well as this, the standard classroom setting often conflicted with my sensory perception. For instance, the only way I was able to concentrate while reading was to plug my ears and put my head under my desk.¹²

For these reasons, it is understandable that Lukey ends his article by doubting whether autistic students and the COI are compatible.¹³ Seeing as the COI is the prominent method for pre-college philosophy education, one must wonder whether autistic students are destined to, as Lukey said, “miss the P4C bus.”¹⁴ An argument concluding that they are would look something like the following:

Incompatibility Argument

1. If autistic students cannot properly participate in the COI, then a philosophical education is unavailable to autistic students.
2. Autistic students cannot properly participate in the COI.
3. Therefore, a philosophical education is unavailable to autistic students.

It is my contention that the first premise is false, and the second premise might be false (depending on the goals and definition of the COI).

11 Lukey, “Rethinking Dialogue,” 28.

12 Lukey, “Rethinking Dialogue,” 28.

13 Lukey, “Rethinking Dialogue,” 28.

14 Lukey, “Rethinking Dialogue,” 28.

III. ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF PHILOSOPHIZING

Beginning with premise two, it is important to define “properly participating.” By “properly participate,” I mean that students are able to accomplish the goals of the COI. Under the current pedagogy, the goal is to verbally communicate philosophical ideas with peers in an effective, empathetic, and dialogical manner. As mentioned above, there are compelling reasons for thinking that many autistic students will be unable to meet those demands. However, it is not clear that the COI is *required* to focus on verbal, face-to-face dialogue to be a community of inquiry. Instead, if the COI is fundamentally about *collaborative* inquiries, then a verbal discussion component is not necessary, and autistic students may be able to properly participate.

By “collaboration,” I mean roughly the following: S and P are in collaboration if, and only if, S and P share the same goal, and S’s contributions further P’s progress in reaching said goal (and vice versa). It is essential that the students share the same goal to capture how collaboration involves working together as equals. Similarly, one student unilaterally assisting the other is not collaboration, but mentorship. Instead, as a metaphorical example, two students may desire to complete the same puzzle, even though each student only has half of the available pieces. It is necessary, then, that each student’s resources be eventually combined with the other to form a full picture. Combining resources in this way calls for autistic students to not be segregated from their peers at all times.¹⁵

Moreover, notice that my account of collaboration says nothing of *how* students are pursuing their goals and assisting one another. This reflects an anecdote from Price in which one of her students refused to write a draft of his paper.¹⁶ Instead, he would write a complete essay after thoroughly thinking it through.¹⁷ Importantly, Price notes that her student was earning “fair grades” on his papers.¹⁸ This anecdote illustrates how a goal, such as writing a paper, can be accomplished in many ways. One method may work best for most students, but one size rarely if ever fits all.

Successfully introducing a plurality of learning styles to the COI involves recognizing that the community’s goal is not to explore a philosophical question through a collaborative *dialogue* but to explore a

15 More on this in “Objections and Replies.”

16 Margaret Price, “Ways to Move: Presence, Participation, and Resistance in Kairotic Space,” in *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 66.

17 Price, “Ways to Move,” 66.

18 Price, “Ways to Move,” 67.



philosophical question *collaboratively*. This idea seems entirely compatible with Lipman's initial conception of the COI. For instance, he writes that nobody should be excluded "without adequate justification," that verbal participation is encouraged but not required, and that face-to-face relationships are not "essential."¹⁹ Similar sentiments are found within the works of John Dewey, who argued that a desirable community is one that "makes provision for participation" of all individuals and "secures flexible readjustment of its institutions."²⁰ Thus, the spirit of the COI may be kept intact even if verbal dialogue is not the sole means of collaboration.

However, one may claim that verbal dialogue is inseparable from the COI as it is defined today. That is, any attempt to alter the COI's verbal nature is to semantically construct an entirely different pedagogy in its place. If so, then the COI is not the only available pedagogy for philosophical education and must be replaced. I am not concerned about whether a more inclusive pedagogy will be called the "Community of Inquiry." If supporting a plurality of learning styles results in the abandonment of the COI, then I encourage that outcome. In other words, even if premise two of the Incompatibility Argument is true, premise one is false. For the remainder of the paper, I will be using the term "COI" to represent the pedagogy of Lipman's vision that does not necessarily require verbal dialogue.

As an example of an alternative pedagogical method, logic is the backbone of philosophy, and many college students studying philosophy are required to take at least one logic course. Regarding autistic children in particular, I hypothesize that symbolic logic instruction would be a success. Personally, my first logic course radically changed the way that I viewed communication. Since most statements can be symbolized, I have found that I can better comprehend what someone is saying by visually picturing their words within symbolic notation. Similarly, perhaps students should be given the opportunity to annotate the dialogue of their peers, translating it into symbolic form so that others could view the structure of their arguments.²¹ Throughout my childhood, I found communicating complicated ideas through letters to be more successful than communicating through spoken words. Dialogue may still be available to autistic students if they are allowed to participate asynchronously.²² Under my view of collaboration, there is no temporal

restriction—students may be in collaboration for a matter of months. With that in mind, facilitators ought to entertain the idea of written dialogues. Written dialogues would, firstly, eliminate the sensory stressors from the face-to-face COI. Secondly, they would allow students who struggle with verbal communication to participate in writing.²³ Regardless of if these methods would be helpful for most autistic students, they are two of the many alternative ways to engage with philosophy and are a sign that current pedagogies ought to broaden their scope.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

One may object to my move from verbal dialogue to collaboration by arguing that verbal dialogue is indispensable to philosophy courses. For instance, it may be the case that nonverbal pedagogies would eliminate the fluidity and spontaneity of verbal dialogues. Additionally, by waiving the requirement to verbally participate, I am allowing autistic students to miss out on the activity that would improve their philosophical skills most. Finally, it could be objected that prioritizing nonverbal pedagogies would be unfair to the majority of students who presumably prefer verbal dialogues.

Firstly, it is not clear to me that verbal skills are the epitome of philosophical flourishing. Whether modern or contemporary, we generally do not study the spoken words of philosophers, but the academic works that they produce—some of which are incredibly symbolic.²⁴ The value of philosophical works comes from their clear communication of logical arguments, not their verbal fluidity or spontaneity.

Secondly, the notion that educators must choose to either further develop a student's strengths or improve their weaknesses is a false dichotomy; I am not convinced that only one option is available. Additionally, unique modes of thinking are precisely what cause paradigm shifts. By allowing the student to develop their natural strengths, both the student and the society at large reap the benefits.

19 Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 96.

20 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 99.

21 Price, "Ways to Move," 94–5.

22 To make an implicit assumption explicit: My conception of a "dialogue" is not necessarily verbal in nature. However, it seems to me that a "dialogue" must be, broadly speaking, communicative.

23 For a recent example of this objection, see Rebekah Wanic and Nina Powell, "The Problem with Student-Centered Education," *Heterodox: The Blog*, October 11, 2022, <https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/the-problem-with-student-centered-education/>.

24 Consider - Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), and Benedict Spinoza, "Ethics," in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 213–382.



Finally, I am not suggesting that *every* student must participate in nonverbal activities. As previously mentioned, students could practice symbolically annotating an existing verbal dialogue. Rather, there are ways for students to engage in different activities *together*. Moreover, pitting the needs of the many against the needs of the few is fundamentally antithetical to a collaborative community. Effectively reaching a shared goal involves utilizing the strengths and perspectives of all individuals. Admittedly, it is unlikely that every student will have their educational needs met at all times. However, this is not uniquely true of philosophy courses that include autistic students. Any group of students will possess varied aptitudes and levels of understanding which must be individually cultivated. In sum, a group of individuals cannot be accurately described as “collaborative” if a portion of them is deliberately cast aside.

However, one might also object to my notion of collaboration by observing that students must eventually exchange their knowledge with one another. To return to the metaphor, there must be a point at which the numerous puzzle pieces are merged into a larger picture. Assuming that this merging is primarily accomplished through verbal mediums, it is reasonable to worry that autistic students will struggle or be completely unable to do so. As a result, perhaps a collaborative outlook will nevertheless fail to offer a pedagogy in which autistic students may properly participate.

As previously mentioned, verbal mediums are not the only available means of communication. Namely, students may trade written pieces, which seemed to work for many notable philosophers who interchanged letters with their coinquirers. Additionally, visual aids may also serve a communicative purpose. For example, in *The Geometry of Desert*, Shelly Kagan explains numerous theories of desert by using over 200 graphs.²⁵ By visually mapping ideas in a similar way, two students may theoretically learn from one another without relying upon spoken words. Thus, both offered objections fail in their overemphasis on the necessity of verbal communication.

This brings me to the final objection. I have been writing as if the students in question possess the capability to communicate in these versatile and unique ways. However, there will be students who simply *cannot* write letters, symbolize arguments, or draw meaningful graphs. Can the P4C movement accommodate these students? Admittedly, I am unsure of how to respond to these cases. If the bare minimum to do philosophy requires having properties X, Y, and Z, and a person does not have the properties X, Y, and Z, then it follows that they cannot “do philosophy.” However, there are two points that must be stressed. Firstly, the students in question are still moral patients, and they are

entitled to not be treated as anything less than such. Secondly, perhaps the community should be valued more than the inquiry. That is, the primary goal that students should be collaboratively pursuing is much grander than, say, developing a theory of free will. Instead, the primary goal of all education is to learn how to assist and peacefully live among one another. In that case, students should not be segregated from their peers, as “the very process of living together educates.”²⁶

In conclusion, the dominant pedagogy within P4C courses has room to be more accessible to alternative learning styles. When I reflect upon the gift that philosophy has been for my life, I only wish that I had discovered it sooner. My hope is for many young people to be introduced to philosophy before they enter college. To do so, we must acknowledge that there exists a wide variety of means to engage with the discipline. The fact that one method is most common neither implies that it is best nor that all students must adopt it to avoid being excluded.

25 Shelly Kagan, *The Geometry of Desert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

26 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 6.





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DOI: 10.33043/S.16.1.50-61

