Community Philosophy: a project summary

November 2009

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This summary pulls together experiences, reflections and practical guidance from a three-year Community Philosophy project that involved a range of different people, age groups and activities.

The project – also known as the 'Thinking Village Project' – was a 'demonstration' project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), designed to promote intergenerational understanding. JRF's demonstration projects create an opportunity to undertake innovative work, put theory into practice and experiment with ideas.

The summary looks at:
- what Community Philosophy is;
- how to use it;
- what participants in the project thought of it; and
- the benefits and challenges of this approach.

It aims to introduce the methodology of Community Philosophy to a wide range of practitioners, especially those working in the community, as a possible way of promoting conversation and positive relationships, and democratising community involvement.

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About Community Philosophy

What is Community Philosophy?

The project drew upon two traditions: 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) and especially its method of 'Community of Enquiry'; and the informal and community education sector and its emphasis on relationships, democracy and mutual learning.

Community of Enquiry

Community of Enquiry is an approach to discussion used by a group of learners over time. The group reflects on, and inquires into, a question they have freely chosen; they ask **their** questions, not those posed by others. The Enquiry aims to develop understanding, identify meaning and search for truth. Reasoning, discipline and focus are very important, as is caring for and respecting others' opinions. This makes it possible to take risks with thoughts and ideas, and give and take criticism. Community of Enquiry combines critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking – the so-called '4 Cs'.

A range of stimuli can act as starting points for discussion. Visual images (pictures, photographs or works of art) are popular, as is written material (a story or article). Drama and outdoor experiences are less common but also effective.

Philosophy for Children tends to be based in a school environment with a 'captive audience' in the classroom. The world of community work, on the other hand, demands a more democratic approach and a greater investment in developing trust-based relationships within the community.

Community Philosophy is a mechanism for widening participation in decision-making at all levels, from choosing to get involved in the first place, to participating in the development and design of programmes, to deciding the extent to which outcomes might be translated into other actions. A good grasp of the 'standard model' of Community of Enquiry is required but also a willingness to be flexible as the work unfolds. Interventions are constantly informed by changing circumstances, and evolve in harmony with the interests and influence of the community. In this way, the method of Community of Enquiry can be said to be 'naturalised' to its context.

Does it 'work'?

Practical philosophy is rare, but the innovative and creative aspects of Community Philosophy offer potential for its wider use and appreciation. The project found that Community Philosophy could:

- be an effective means of engaging people;
- act as a 'conversational bridge' between different groups and the generations;
- help all involved reach deeper levels of understanding;
- support and broaden participation in community life;
- provide a space for constructive engagement with real world issues, including those that are controversial, cause conflict and are considered culturally 'taboo'; and
- be enjoyable for its own sake.

Some reflections from participants

"[Community Philosophy] gives us a process to talk to and listen to each other. One of the great things is the listening; now we will listen to each other. And there's turn-taking; it made us be quiet and listen."

"Through talking [to each other] we realised there wasn't much difference between us. Being involved gave us the confidence to talk to young people outside [in the community]. Young people came across and chatted to us in the street. They understood us better. At first, they looked on us as older people; now they look on us as friends."

"We have used philosophy outside of the project… It helps keep people on course. It's different from how we usually work because people join in more. You learn how to let other people talk; you learn how to listen."

Why use Community Philosophy?

Community Philosophy represents both a tool in community work and a discrete methodology in its own right. It can be used by a range of practitioners,

as it is relevant whenever there is a commitment to community involvement in decision-making.

Some clarity of purpose is important. Potential users should ask such questions as 'Why do I want to work in this way?', 'What do I hope to achieve?', 'What is it about Community Philosophy that I value?' and 'How might I recreate this?'

Features of Community Philosophy
- It is critical, creative, caring and collaborative.
- It emphasises self-correction and self-development through rigorous questioning, reasoning and reflection on experience.
- It examines and scrutinises perceived wisdom and community norms.
- It is democratic.

What needs can it meet?
- It engages with – and seeks solutions to – real issues in a purposefully analytical way.
- It effectively supports the participation of communities, especially young people deemed 'hard to reach'.

What are the benefits?
- It promotes good thinking and actions.
- It supports learning.

What are the measures of success?
- It is used over time rather than employed as a 'one-off', i.e. enquiry breeds enquiry.
- Positive outcomes are identified through participants' self-assessment, community evaluation, and wider networks of stakeholders, especially when evaluation takes the form of Community of Enquiry.
- It increases community responsibility, especially for the welfare, socialisation and education of young people.
- It is integrated into the wider practical implementation of social policy.

What support is needed?
- Those using it must be enabled to take risks and value uncertainty in the pursuit of good outcomes.
- Freedom to work flexibly and democratically: a commitment to 'philosophical management'.
- A commitment to being 'pro-social' e.g. viewing

young people as people, rather than problems to be fixed.

Using Community Philosophy
Community Philosophy needs to be sympathetic to its context. This means the standard elements of Community of Enquiry should be employed or disregarded as appropriate.

Having confidence in the tool
Training in the facilitation of Community of Enquiry is very important and a number of courses exist. These tend to focus towards those who will work in schools. Training that is more suited to Community Philosophy is in development.

Planning
The most important activity is planning. A strong plan gives the facilitator confidence to take risks and celebrate uncertainty. It should, however, be disregarded should the community decide to pursue different interests. A crucial consideration in shaping the plan is the setting. In contrast to school-based P4C, Community Philosophy happens in many places; the environment can itself be a powerful stimulus for dialogue.

Typical stages of Community of Enquiry
- ***Preparation***: consideration of setting, and also simple tasks like creating a circle of participants and possibly some encouragement to participate in some pre-planned 'thinking' activities that act as a useful cerebral warm-up and ice-breaker.
- ***Presentation***: in which a stimulus is introduced.
- ***Thinking time***: giving scope for personal reflection on the stimulus.
- ***Conversation***: or shared reflection, in which members of the group speak to one another about their thoughts.
- ***Formulation***: generating questions, typically by small groups being invited to pose a question about the stimulus.
- ***Airing of questions***: examining all the questions, particularly for their openness or philosophical value, i.e. they don't have definitive answers.
- ***Selection of questions***: using a process to decide on the Enquiry question – sometimes

through simple voting or, if time allows, through further debate to make links between questions or determine a further question that is sympathetic to the others. Also, in Community Philosophy, community conversations might have already identified an issue that can then be formulated as a pre-determined question.

- **First words**: where members of the group give their responses to the chosen question.
- **The Enquiry**: which focuses on building on these initial responses and subsequent comments made in following the 'line of argument', i.e. the pursuit of truth.

In Community Philosophy, time is often also invested in a **concluding phase**. Participants are invited to identify the things they think they have learnt and what action, if any, might be taken to integrate this new learning into everyday life.

- **Final words**: in which participants have an opportunity to reflect on the Enquiry.

Reflection

Reflection helps the facilitator to understand how the methodology is interpreted and used by those they work with, thereby enabling them to make the changes demanded of working democratically. Reflection is a feature of community work generally but is essential to Community Philosophy.

Opportunities for participants to reflect should also be planned for within each activity, although their timing should be subject to discussion.

Challenges

Community Philosophy is not without its challenges. Amongst these are the tension of 'managing' a project that requires such a high degree of on-the-ground autonomy, flexibility and risk-taking. Also, the idea of Community Philosophy is, in some ways, 'counter-cultural' in a UK context where there is, it could be argued, general scepticism about philosophy and denigration of 'talk' rather than 'action'.

Community Philosophy represents a challenge to current policy orientations that aim at improving 'life chances' and 'social mobility' in preference to promoting 'better living' and 'well-being'. Rather than seeing interventions as ways to make a transition to a better future, Community Philosophy asks 'how can we live well today?' This is less tangible and more difficult to measure but arguably may render wider social benefits.

In practice, the process of deliberate uncertainty brought benefits including community cohesion, greater links and networks within the community, and democratic civic engagement.

About the project

The Community Philosophy Project was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and ran from 2006 to 2009. The work was led by Project Director Graeme Tiffany and a team of three Community Philosophers.

You can read an independent evaluation of this project (Porter and Seeley, 2008) at http://www.jrf. org.uk/publications/promoting-intergenerational-understanding-through-community-philosophy

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Further information

The full report, **Community Philosophy: A project report** by Graeme Tiffany, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

Other formats available.
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