

Community Philosophy

A project report

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Reflections on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's New Earswick Community Philosophy Project.

Graeme Tiffany

This three-year experiment used an approach called 'Community Philosophy' to promote conversations and develop positive relationships between different groups of people within a community. This report:

- draws on the examination and analysis that was part of the project's day-to-day activity;
- captures the reflections of the project director and participants in the project;
- describes the theory behind the project, along with its activities (in the form of a series of practice-based examples); and
- derives lessons of use to people who work in the community, especially youth and community workers, and those with responsibility for community involvement and organisational governance.

Thinking is the ultimate human resource. The quality of our future depends entirely on the quality of our thinking.

(De Bono, E., De Bono's Thinking Course, BBC Books, 1982)

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Executive summary

The Community Philosophy project in New Earswick aimed to promote community conversations as a means of developing positive community relationships. It drew upon a range of theories and community-based practices that have been used to examine and solve problems, support dialogue and celebrate thinking.

There is an inherent tension between philosophical approaches and short summaries, but what follows seeks to draw together some key learning from the project's experience.

- Community Philosophy, as practised by the project, drew on two traditions: first, the experience of Philosophy for Children (P4C) and especially its method of Community of Enquiry; and, second, the informal education sector and its emphasis on relationships, democracy and mutual learning. A major conclusion of the project was that authentic practice required elements of both these traditions, but differed from them.
- The use of a particular schema has to fit with the context in which the work takes place. Rather than adhering rigidly to the Community of Enquiry methodology, the project found that interventions had always to be informed by changing circumstances. Successful Community Philosophy needs to be flexible, creative and adaptable.
- Community Philosophy has the capacity to engage people and to retain their interest. Middle-aged people were the most difficult to engage with. The project found that issue-focussed sessions, based around a predetermined philosophical question, were most likely to engage this age group to any significant degree. However, this required moving away from the 'pure' approach, where questions for discussion are determined by the group itself.
- Community Philosophy can act as a catalyst for the democratisation of community life, particularly by broadening the base of participation. In the project, it acted as a conversational bridge between the young people in the community and the decision-making structures with which they were rarely directly involved.
- Community Philosophy can help all age groups reach new levels of understanding. The project found that it allowed for constructive engagement with conflict and controversy (such as anti-social behaviour) and that it provided space for people to discuss things that could be difficult to talk about elsewhere (such as death and dying). Importantly, though, people enjoyed Community Philosophy for its own sake.
- The project worked with many different groups and in many different settings. Its intergenerational activity, bringing together older people from a local care home and younger people from a local street corner, was particularly successful.

- Community Philosophy was not without its challenges. Among these was the tension of managing a project that required a high degree of on-the-ground autonomy, flexibility and risk-taking. The project also had to introduce an approach to the community that was in some ways counter-cultural. In the UK, there is, it could be argued, general scepticism about philosophy and its elitist connotations, and a denigration of ‘talk’ rather than ‘action’. Practical philosophy is rare, but Community Philosophy, being innovative and creative, represents an important building block for its wider use and appreciation.
- The project threw up a number of unanticipated outcomes throughout its duration. Among these was the fact that different age groups being out and about together generates surprise among the general public, and the marked mutuality of input and benefit between older and younger age groups when engaged in inter-generational activities. Among a small number of people, the project also generated some unexpected hostility.
- Community Philosophy represents a challenge to current policy orientations (such as the focus on transitions and the concern with predetermined measurable outcomes). Yet the project found it had much to offer the social policy agenda. Community cohesion, enhanced social capital and democratic civic engagement are just a few of the benefits to come out of a process that, necessarily, celebrates uncertainty.

Introduction

This document describes the work of a demonstration project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the *New Earswick Community Philosophy project*. Demonstration projects create an opportunity to undertake innovative work, test theses and experiment with ideas.

The project was subject to an external evaluation that has been published (Porter, S. and Seeley, C. (2008) *Promoting Intergenerational Understanding through Community Philosophy*; www.jrf.org.uk/publications/promoting-intergenerational-understanding-through-community-philosophy).

This document, on the other hand, captures internal reflections. It draws on the regular evaluation – the ongoing examination and analysis of practice – that was part of the project's day-to-day activity.

The report describes the project's theoretical underpinnings, activities (in the form of a series of practice-based examples) and learning (from things that went well and not so well). The hope is that the lessons learnt might be useful to others interested in using similar philosophical approaches in their work.

Although community workers might be seen as the natural audience, the document is also – perhaps particularly – directed at managers and those with responsibilities for organisational governance. They too might want to consider the added value that Community Philosophy can bring to the work of their organisations.

1 Background: where did the project come from?

The ideas behind the project were catalysed in discussions arising from a seminar, '*Maximising Tolerance, Minimising Nuisance*', the aim of which was to think critically about anti-social behaviour – as perception, reality and a focus of social policy.

In its subsequent formulation, the project sought to draw upon a range of theories and community-based practices that had been used successfully around the country to examine and solve problems, support inter-generational dialogue and celebrate thinking and conversation.

Theoretical underpinnings

Study of the theory and practice of 'dialogue' reveals that it is a word more often bandied around than put into practice. As distinct from conversation, dialogue is a process we enter into with the aspiration that we can learn from one another. And learning, in this sense, implies being prepared to examine often strongly held beliefs and adopt new ways of thinking, as appropriate. Dialogue is a collaborative endeavour that seeks to draw upon the combined resources of those involved.

There is, of course, a long history of working in this way. In the days of ancient Greece, Socrates famously posed difficult questions to encourage in-depth thinking; great value was placed on the 'examined life'. Since then, philosophising has routinely been valued as a way of reflecting on experience and developing thinking in pursuit of answers to questions for which there is no definitive answer. This is a world where reason-based opinion, rather than scientific fact, holds sway. Its aim is to think critically about the elements of everyday life for which there are no definitive answers.

In recent times, Philosophy for Children (P4C) has been introduced into many schools to support thinking and the development of communication skills (speaking and listening). P4C emphasises

self-development and self-correction, through rigorous questioning and reasoning. Both P4C and Community of Enquiry (the 'method' of P4C) are looked at in more detail below.

There is also growing interest in the use of philosophy in non-formal settings. Philosophical activities now also take place in informal settings; for example, Café Philo involves a short presentation setting the scene for an evening of convivial conversation, usually with accompanying refreshments. This is just one example of philosophy being used in a practical or leisure-oriented way; and more and more people are interested in using it within the community at large.

The project's aim was to incorporate all of these ideas into its work, and develop new ones. A further motivation was a desire to revisit and reclaim the value of argument and engender a positive respect for the philosophical imagination, particularly in a cultural era where conflict is routinely judged in a negative light.

Key influences

Paulo Freire

A primary influence was the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, particularly his educational practice of 'conscientization'. In this, groups of people are encouraged to consider not just the problems they readily identify with but also to 'problematise' other elements of their experience. The process actively promotes *critical* analysis of cultural norms and those aspects of life not seen to be problematic. It aims to support the development of a political identity, particularly in communities disenfranchised from, and because of, politics. These ideas are also present in the work of the acclaimed radical American educator, bell hooks, who speaks of the need to 'talk back to authority'.

In Freire's thesis, these forms of enquiry lead to a new awareness of the world, and it is for

that reason he described the process as one of 'conscientization', or consciousness-raising.

Philosophy for Children (P4C)

Philosophy for Children (P4C) originated in the work of Matthew Lipman and colleagues at the New Jersey-based Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in the early 1970s. Lipman produced children's storybooks and other material that aimed to tap into and build upon the innate curiosity of children as a foundation for learning. Drawing on the work of John Dewey, these resources acted as a stimulus for systematic questioning in the form of Communities of Enquiry.

Community of Enquiry

Community of Enquiry is an approach to discussion used by a group of learners over a period of time. In such a community, co-operation is valued highly. Together, the group reflect on, and enquire into, a question they have together generated and freely chosen; it is a space for them to ask **their** questions rather than accept questions posed by others.

The enquiry aims to develop understanding, identify meaning and search for truth. Reasoning, discipline and focus are very important, but not to the exclusion of caring for and respecting others' opinions. This makes it a safe space to take risks with thoughts and ideas, and both give and take criticism. Progressively, questions get deeper and more thoughtful; imagination is unleashed. A 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 enquiries. Visual images such as pictures, photographs or works of art are popular, as is written material, be it from storybook or newspaper article. Drama and outdoor experiences are less common but nonetheless effective.

P4C is now practised in more than 30 countries. While systematic, it is also relatively simple. Pupils share a stimulus, for example a story read to them by a teacher or a picture they have

been given. They spend time thinking about what this experience has meant to them and devising questions that interest them. The teacher acts as a facilitator, helping the group first choose a question they all have an interest in, and then discuss it. The process aims to support respect for, and interest in, the diversity of views; questioning assumptions and giving reasons for opinions are encouraged.

Ideally, pupils have extended opportunities to experience involvement in a Community of Enquiry. Over time, the aim is to develop skills in thinking and concept analysis in the pursuit of good reasoning and judgement. Complementary activities (such as games) and deliberate provocation to link philosophical discussions to everyday life, in or out of school, foster learning.

Informal education

Community Philosophy has much in common with informal education. In this, conversation is the medium for reflecting on the everyday experiences of those involved, rather than those matters being determined as of value by a formal teacher. In this sense, informal education is unstructured, with the substance of learning coming out of these conversations.

People are encouraged to think, to think about their thinking, and to develop their ideas so as to work out what they want to learn – and this dialogue itself is recognised as a form of learning. Critical to the process is the educator not being in control of the setting; the work happens in places that people freely choose to be in. This does not preclude working in institutional settings (including schools) but the space used should be a 'social' space, free from the prescription of a curriculum. The primary task of the informal educator, then, is to manage the environment so learning can take place.

The philosophies of childhood that underpin Philosophy for Children see children as possessors of knowledge and experience. Informal educators share this sentiment, believing that all people, at all stages of their lives, can contribute to the learning of others.

We are all philosophers

This links to a final important point. The project started from the premise that everyone can be philosophical. Being open-minded and interested

in learning from others was regarded as being more important than having academic knowledge about philosophy.

These, then, are the background and borrowings of Community Philosophy; they were used to inform the aims and objectives of the project.

Community Philosophy project: aims and objectives

Recently, efforts have been made to use the central methodology of Community of Enquiry (as used in Philosophy for Children) in community settings (akin to informal education). This has included intergenerational activities that bring people of different ages together to discuss issues affecting their community.

This project was similar but with an added dimension; it sought to trial the use of philosophy in the context of an entire geographical community.

Together, the various influences shaped negotiations about the two principal aims of the project:

- to promote wider community conversations (especially between generations and especially about controversial issues) that could be enjoyed for their own sake, could provide a medium for learning, could act as a stimulus for action, or could be valued in other ways;
- through these conversations and actions, to develop relationships within the community (especially across the generations) and across professional groupings, to enable groups to work with each other, even around issues of potential conflict, and to generate enough momentum to enable dialogue to become self-sustaining.

2 Practice: what did the project do?

From the outset, the project undertook a wide variety of activities. These are described in the series of practice examples presented below, from which key learning points are distilled.

Practice examples

The Advisory Group: letting diverse opinions flourish

An early task was to establish an Advisory Group for the project which itself became a forum in which to engage philosophically with the task in hand. The meetings, at which project workers were full attendees, were the scene of many in-depth discussions about the project's values, aims, objectives and practices. The group included a number of people with experience of using philosophy to foster learning, but it also included others who could reasonably be described as sceptical. The (deliberate) diversity of views represented within the group was particularly valuable.

This appreciation of difference was replicated on the ground, where the project sought to approach day-to-day practice in an open-minded way. Groups were allowed to pursue their own interests; the result was high engagement among those present and Communities of Enquiry that were interesting and challenging. This created a culture in which participants bravely worked in new ways and examined often strongly held beliefs. Groups ranging from the local residents' forum to people living in sheltered accommodation and youth groups have explored a wide range of ideas and questions, such as 'community: what does it mean in today's world?', 'loneliness', and 'what shapes our perceptions?'

In all, there was an emphasis on working together and drawing upon the combined resources of others to assist thinking and, where appropriate and freely chosen, identify action that could be taken.

Key learning

The project's experiences suggest that governance, in whatever form it might take, appears to benefit from time invested in thinking about aims and objectives. This is particularly so when working in a complex policy environment where language is highly contested. It is here that the philosophical endeavour of concept analysis is valuable. One example from the project is community cohesion. This is identified as an aim of many social interventions but is rarely subject to the level of scrutiny required to ensure that all around the table are 'singing from the same song sheet'.

Establishing a group that deliberately reflects diversity of opinion inevitably leads to contestation and this can, and should, be regarded positively. Rather than working in a prescribed way, where what will happen has already been written and decided on, the Community Philosophy approach fosters genuine deliberation. Contestation is a powerful stimulus for dialogue and enquiry and ensures healthy debate, provided time is made available for this to happen. It too is often seen as problematic, instead it should be regarded as something that supports good governance and practice.

Engagement: re-envisioning 'hard-to-reach'

Working with local people's own views of interests, issues and problems supported engagement but it was not plain sailing. Some sectors of the community were difficult to reach, especially those residents of middle age. Through a process of continual reflection, the project regularly altered the focus of its interventions in a concerted attempt to engage this group. Some strategies were more successful than others.

The project had only limited success with its mobile unit (a van parked up in a public space with people actively encouraged to pop in or drop by en route to other things). More structured activities (such as the development of a parent and toddler reading session at the local library) achieved more, particularly informal community picnics and Café Philo-type activities. A community barbeque was most successful of all, perhaps reflecting the value of its family and leisure orientation.

In other settings, a small number of middle-aged people did engage with the project more substantively, typically as a result of their participation in pre-planned issues-focused enquiries. These issues were identified through the careful analysis of community concerns, illustrating the significance of the 'community' dimension of the Community Philosopher's work. The topic of anti-social behaviour was at the forefront of community concerns in the early days of the project.

Shortly after the arrival of the project, a dispersal order was served on the neighbourhood. Dispersal orders give police the power in a designated area to disperse groups of two or more people where their presence has resulted, or is likely to result, in a member of the public being harassed, intimidated, alarmed or distressed. The order proved controversial in many aspects; it was seen to be a product of the lobbying of a small section of the community, and was routinely vilified by many young people who saw themselves as being discriminated against because of it. However, the order certainly provoked what was arguably much-needed community conversation.

The tensions around anti-social behaviour in general, and the dispersal order in particular, were the topic of a great deal of debate and proved fertile ground for philosophical enquiry. A range of seemingly unrelated issues were revealed and subjected to analysis. These included how the media portrays young people; what actually constitutes anti-social behaviour; and the extent to which a person's judgement is widely held and can be reasonably claimed as a community norm.

A series of enquiries took place which identified that a key issue for young people in the area was how they were policed on the streets; many felt they were unfairly treated. An outcome of one session was the idea that they might have similar

dialogues with police officers in a non-conflict situation. A number of meetings were planned, one involving a 'speed-dating' event at which a series of quick-fire questions could be posed to a range of stakeholders (including the police) in the debate about anti-social behaviour. These discussions were judged by the participants to be very constructive.

The questions put to us by young people were challenging and informative. Challenging because they questioned our basic rights as police officers to do our job and informative because the questions themselves spoke of the thoughts young people have of the police ... Colleagues said the project had helped them understand what the views and expectations of young people were when they interacted with the police. This has helped police officers to deal with reaction and behaviour they sometimes encounter in a more empathetic way.

The success of this work achieved recognition further afield and the young people were invited to facilitate discussions with other groups of young people in other parts of the city. Buoyed by their achievements, they went on to form a philosophy group, P4U. The group met fortnightly and, on the basis of encouragement from project workers, went on to participate in intergenerational work in the interim weeks (see below).

Many of the issues that appear to stimulate engagement and catalyse community involvement are those fraught with controversy. However community meetings on these issues can easily end up in shouting matches as to who is to blame and this can exacerbate existing fractures within the community and even create new ones. Community Philosophy represents a progressive alternative to the real and growing danger that investing faith in others to sort things out weakens a community's ability to solve its own problems.

Anti-social behaviour: an issue for dialogue

While most people may wish to live a life free from interference, it seems increasingly rare for people to want to intervene personally

or in solidarity with others to ‘do something about it’. Residents instead might seek only to pressure the authorities into taking action on their behalf.

The project found that when residents engaged in a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon, consensus emerged that the issue was highly complex and that the intervention of the authorities could only ever have limited impact.

Most participants concluded that the issue was as much to do with perception as reality, and that attitudes (especially towards young people) were significantly informed by these perceptions. In digging deeper, Communities of Enquiry concluded that the quality of relationships was at the heart of the matter – between neighbours, between local agencies and residents, and between the generations.

Attributing effects to specific interventions is notoriously difficult to achieve. What can be said, though, is that during the course of the project, and following a lot of work by the project around this issue, tensions around anti-social behaviour dissipated.

The experience of the project also threw up questions about the accessibility of community involvement structures and their capacity to act as catalysts for change. Accessibility means much more than hanging a (metaphorical or literal) ‘welcome’ sign over the door; it also means acting to ensure that the way ‘business’ is done (the organisation’s systems and structures, and the methods and processes used to engage the public and conduct meetings) is easily understood and actively encourages participation. The project itself was able to do this; some participants reported that their involvement was the first time they had become *actively* engaged in community issues:

I’ve been to a good number of community meetings, but this is the first I’ve actually spoken at. I found the way we worked both interesting and supportive.

Widening participation is not necessarily unproblematic. Some perceive it as a threat to their

existing power bases since if others contribute more it can be difficult to maintain the level of influence previously enjoyed. In the project’s experience, this occasionally manifested itself in antagonism towards the work, an interesting unanticipated outcome.

Key learning points

The popular perception of young people being hard to reach is in some ways inaccurate. In reality, the middle-aged seem to be harder to reach, largely because they are busy: busy going to work, busy bringing up children.

In ‘traditional’ P4C, the group works together to generate its own questions. In Community Philosophy, however, we found that promoting a predetermined question had the capacity to stimulate interest in, and support the engagement of, the community. This was especially so for the middle-aged group who appeared to need a strong and clearly defined reason for participating. The trick is to try to learn what these questions might be, through listening carefully in everyday conversations with the community.

Community Philosophy can assist all age groups in reaching new levels of understanding. It also has the potential to act as a catalyst for the democratisation of community life, not least because it can broaden the base of participation. It can give voice to those who often struggle to articulate their opinions for a range of reasons (not least because they lack the confidence to do so) and it can promote better listening.

Because issues that engage a community are often controversial, they risk playing out in an adversarial way, which is unlikely to result in long-term change. Agencies need to find a way to support communities to participate in authentic partnerships while at the same time nourishing their capacity to act for themselves.

Depersonalising issues by placing them in the centre of an enquiry makes it possible for the community to think critically and analyse what is going on, without recourse to blame.

Talking as a form of action

Notwithstanding the above, there does seem to be

a strong cultural resistance to the idea that talking is a form of action:

We reached conclusions. The conversation could have gone on; the limitation was that we didn't identify actions.

From the project's perspective, talking supports thinking and thinking is a precondition to changing one's mind; it is the foundation for behavioural change. And reasoned behaviour change (based on critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking) must be considered a form of action. This represents a significant challenge to the dominant cultural position illustrated by the familiar phrase 'all talk and no action'.

Some of the work did have outcomes that fit a more conventional view of action in the practical sense. For example, street-based work led to relationships with a group of young people who were keen on basketball but faced playing on a local court that was potholed and substandard. This was part of a wider issue relating to the lack of leisure facilities for young people, especially older teenagers, which had been highlighted in enquiries about the underlying reasons for anti-social behaviour. The project worked to bring different parties together to discuss the issue in order to gain agreements and resources to create new opportunities.

Much of this work was akin to generic community work – including the all-important dimension of investing in building relationships – but the workers were also able to use skills developed through training in philosophical enquiry to facilitate others' thinking. They used Community of Enquiry methodology over the course of several meetings, some of which were wider public consultation events. Philosophy acted as a conversational bridge between young people, the wider community and the decision-making structures in which they were rarely involved.

Key learning

Communities of Enquiry have a good prospect of leading to practical action, and may well do so. However, the project concluded that enquiry in Community Philosophy should not insist upon this as its aim. Experience

confirmed the rationale that conversations could, just as well, be valued for their own sake.

In Community Philosophy, as in generic community work, success is almost always underpinned by strong relationships between project workers and those they work with. These relationships can be seen to build confidence and interest in open-endedness. Participants come to appreciate the intrigue, and pleasure, associated with uncertainty.

When is philosophy 'philosophy'?

The project was committed to resisting the promotion of particular philosophies. There was a deliberate decision not to teach the ideas of the 'great' philosophers, rather to encourage people to philosophise. Its primary objective was to promote philosophy as something everyone can do and something in which there are no wrong answers. Learning about it, in the academic sense, was seen as much less important.

Nevertheless, some of the groups that met most often did, over time, develop an interest in the work of philosophers and this seemed to emerge naturally.

The involvement of a volunteer visiting philosopher illustrates this well. There was no attempt to teach philosophy in terms of instruction, but academic philosophy was used as a stimulus for philosophical enquiry. One animated session, for example, involved a group of young people being encouraged to link the work of Rousseau to the film *The Matrix*.

At times, the very title 'philosophy' was an issue. The project picked up some concerns in the community about its elitist connotations. On the one hand its name perhaps acted as a barrier to participation; on the other it was seen as something that needed to be defended, in that philosophy was something that 'everybody' could do. The project agreed to stick with the original name, as it often appeared to spark valuable debate about what precisely philosophy was, and to stick to the original premise, that everyone could engage philosophically. Throughout, the question 'Am I a philosopher, or not?' has reverberated around the community.

In a similar vein, the language of Community Philosophy can be recognised in the comments

made by participants when asked to describe and evaluate their experiences. Many made references to ‘process’ and ‘turn-taking’. These and other words were purposefully used by the workers when explaining what Community Philosophy was and how Community of Enquiry worked. Rather than acting as a barrier, these words seemed to become understood and used.

Key learning

It appears that where Community Philosophy takes the form of a developmental practice – where it is invested in over time, and where participants have regular and in-depth opportunities to work in a philosophical way – an interest in other forms of ‘philosophy’ may follow.

The key challenge to participants, though, was the demonstration of ‘philosophical virtues’. Listening was key here, as was recognising that challenging one another can be an expression of caring.

Working in schools

Schools are undeniably part of the community so the project’s aim of engaging the whole community necessarily meant seeking to work with them. It was difficult to gain substantive access given the pressures of the curriculum and the tensions between the open-endedness of the project’s approach and the outcome-based culture evident in schools.

As a result, while the project developed good relationships with the local primary and secondary school and worked in both, it was not always able to develop sessions as freely or as continually as it would have liked. Rather, it negotiated access where it could, for example within the Respect and Relationships elements of the secondary school’s Personal, Social and Citizenship Education (PSCE) syllabus. This involved working with two consecutive whole-year groups and the fact that the school was keen to continue this work indicated that it was valued and successful in its own right. However, the emphasis on short-term programmes with all, rather than more in-depth work with a few, limited the extent to which pupils could become familiar with, and confident in, working in a philosophical way.

Practice: what did the project do?

Importantly though, the project was able to negotiate access to pastoral form groups. Because schools are typically organised into banded learning groups, these were recognised as being one of the few environments in which young people of differing abilities were present together. Pupils were positive about their experiences of being involved in this way:

I’ve enjoyed it; we don’t usually hang out with each other.

The project team themselves found that the comprehensive nature of these pastoral groups added value to the conversations.

Class teachers were also positive and reported that they had seen a different side to many pupils; those identified as non-academic were seen to participate more fully than was usual and often make powerful and intuitive contributions. Whereas previously these pupils had been quiet and reserved, or sometimes disruptive, Community Philosophy appeared to give them a voice.

Key learning

We might conclude that philosophical enquiry represents an effective medium for engagement, supports improved speaking and listening, and is capable of bolstering the confidence of all ability levels. It also provides a rare opportunity for pupils to learn from each other. Many valued this highly and remarked that such peer-learning was enhanced when the groups were diverse.

In this sense, a Community of Enquiry offers the possibility of a truly comprehensive kind of learning, which is rare today as the bureaucratic demands of social policy often translate into separatist teaching strategies for different ‘bandings’ within a school environment.

Volunteering; reconceptualising philanthropy?

The presence of adult volunteers in the school activities ensured that the work had a community feel to it. Their voices enlivened the discussions and contributed to the diversity of opinion, which was valued highly by all who took part.

Helping with the young people's [after-school] philosophy club has been rewarding. It was interesting because some [of the young people] didn't have much to say at the beginning. Now they tell us their thoughts, and we tell them ours. The philosophy helped us to keep the conversations going.

It is important to note that these adults were generally not facilitating sessions, rather they were taking part in the enquiries. In this way, participating was itself recognised as an important dimension of volunteering – every bit as important as leading or teaching. Such traditional models are arguably more of a hindrance to learning than a benefit, and this reconceptualisation of what it was to be a volunteer had an effect on the experience of all participants.

Having come to this conclusion it seemed reasonable also for the project to broaden the description of 'volunteer' to include all who participated in its life, be they younger or older. This was particularly significant for the young people who were involved in the intergenerational activities (see below).

As part of a framework of support, those adults volunteering in the school met regularly as a group, independent of the school. They participated in a series of Communities of Enquiry in order to examine and learn from their experiences of working with young people. These enquiries proved valuable over and above their aim of improving their ability to support the enquiries of young people. Specifically, they became regarded as a space where the group could explore their own wider personal interests and issues.

Community Philosophy and intergenerational work

A key aim of the project was to facilitate intergenerational dialogue. This work took many forms and involved a wide range of activities. It also involved considerable preparation.

A good deal of work was undertaken with the residents of a local care home before it was suggested that they might consider becoming involved in an intergenerational project. The project workers visited on a regular basis and facilitated a wide range of enquiries on many themes. This experience built confidence in the methodology,

but also helped the residents to develop skills and dispositions – what might be described as 'philosophical virtues'.

[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 to each other.

A similar process took place with a group of young people, many of whom had been involved in the early work around anti-social behaviour and the dispersal order (see above). As noted, the young people had already been involved in establishing a group in their own right: P4U (Philosophy for You). The P4U group met once a fortnight and (from the beginning of the inter-generational project) on alternate weeks with the older people.

Together, they shared a range of stimuli, which became starting points for a wide range of Communities of Enquiry and other shared activities. These included a variety of trips, visits and outdoor experiences to places selected by the groups and workers on the basis of interest, the likelihood that they would act as a good stimulus for dialogue, the availability of refreshments, and access to a space where conversation could flourish. The philosophical dimensions of the activities themselves were invariably informal but some of these informal conversations catalysed more in-depth dialogue as part of the regular, more structured, Communities of Enquiry sessions back at home. The quotes in the box offer a flavour of what was achieved.

Intergenerational understanding: building trust and respect

We've discussed everything from a resident's experience of farming to animal rights and explored questions such as: 'why are we here?', 'should homosexuals [be allowed to] adopt children?' and 'should drugs be tested on animals [and/] or long-term prisoners?' We have had some really interesting subjects; [often] finishing up with questions that were very different from what we started with.

They all tied in with each other, and triggered off something else. Many have been [about] simple things, like chopping wood for the fire compared with central heating, or skinning hares, or the different games we played as kids. It's been about mutual respect; it's been two-way.

It [the project] made a big difference. It brought young and old together. Previously, there had been problems with [some] young people; they had been throwing things at the windows, sometimes smashing them, generally harassing. The residents were a bit wary of young people because of this.

Community Philosophy is a process that enables people to talk things out, and to find their own answers. It bridges gaps in understanding that always seem to have existed. It's this lack of understanding that creates mistrust. We older folk now know that it's only a small minority of young people that cause trouble. It [Community Philosophy] gives us the opportunity to talk to people we don't meet so much.

By listening to them you can better understand young people's world. It's very different from when we were children. They have much more pressure on them at school [than we did].

Through talking [to each other] we realised there wasn't much difference between us. [Being involved in the project] 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. It will be a great pity if it finishes; it's been a great success.

Specific examples of activities included visits to the National Media Museum in Bradford, to Dalby Forest, and to Saltaire, a nineteenth-century 'model village' (now a heritage site) in West Yorkshire. Here, the group took part in some organised role play designed to help people

understand what life would have been like in the past. Another occasion saw the group travelling to Leeds to attend a screening of Astra Taylor's film exploration of philosophical ideas, *Examined Life*. Young and old were unanimous in their view that a good deal of the film had 'gone over their heads' but when they met again for their regular intergenerational meeting, the topic chosen for discussion was 'what it means to miss out on meaning'.

These activities had their fair share of unanticipated outcomes. These included the natural inclination of young people to help those with less mobility. As a result, accessibility became less of an issue – practical support could be provided when needed without having to 'buy it in'. Of greater surprise were responses from the general public when the group were out and about; it was clear that their involvement with one another was considered unusual. This coheres with the group's own conclusions, that it is now common for different age groups to live parallel lives.

The theme of learning from each other featured prominently in evaluations of the intergenerational work. This often had an element of formality: for example, the younger people taught the older people about the use of computers and new technologies, and the older people reciprocated by teaching the young people about games that had gone out of fashion and everyday domestic skills like cake-baking and chopping wood. Notably, the young people valued highly being taught things; they saw learning a practical skill as a tangible benefit of being involved. Importantly, however, this was not one-way instruction.

This sharing of experiences and the desire to teach and learn from each other led to a further activity, compiling a book together (perhaps significantly entitled 'Think'). As one group member commented:

Writing the book has provided us all with knowledge.

Key learning

The project's experience shows that Community Philosophy represents a medium capable of bringing people together in the first place. The difficulties associated with achieving this are rarely articulated but people are very unlikely to be motivated by simply sitting around for a chat.

Community Philosophy seems to offer the kind of 'distance' many need to make a first step. By being involved in a tangible process, often with a series of steps associated with it, participants feel they are taking part in an activity. Thereafter, philosophical enquiry appears to have the capacity to foster a climate of openness, disclosure, intensity and depth. Personal beliefs, attitudes, opinions and lived experiences are regularly put forward.

Evaluating the experiences of intergenerational dialogue revealed that the adults' motivations were more likely to be associated with their own needs than philanthropy towards younger people. Foremost was a concern among older people that they were living lives in which they had little, if any, contact with young people and this was somehow deleterious to their own well-being.

Many lived many miles from their children and grandchildren. The geographical mobility often associated with the pursuit of social mobility was lamented by this group of older people who saw it as breaking up extended families. The rarity of contact with grandchildren, in particular, and the fact that they had so little contact with young people generally, made them less confident about engaging with their grandchildren when they did see them. Hence, they were interested to keep abreast of youth culture.

When young people involved with the project became aware that they were helping in this way, it affected both their sense of worth and their sense of responsibility. Some took this very seriously and it inspired them to seek out further ways in which they could help adults (a good example is that noted above – teaching about new technologies). On a very small scale, this can be seen as a reordering of traditional power relations between younger and older people, and

a reconceptualisation of the young person as teacher or mentor – something that appears to affect their sense of identity, particularly in terms of responsibility.

Key learning

In many ways the value of these intergenerational Community Philosophy-based activities was, first and foremost, little different from that of generic intergenerational work. Both share a context in which non-familial relationships between those younger and those older are rare. Notwithstanding the comments made by all parties about 'learning from each other', it is clear that intergenerational activities have tremendous value for their own sake.

When asked to evaluate their experiences, many of the participants (both young and old) stated, simply, that their discussions had been 'interesting'. We might ask then: 'What is our motivation to talk to each other?' Is it always to learn things? Or is it, perhaps, simply because in doing so we recognise that conversation adds meaning, value and interest to our lives?

In terms of harder outcomes (especially those at the forefront of the social policy agenda) a thesis emerges, that intergenerational Community Philosophy can build social solidarity and challenge cultural intolerance (thus contributing to community cohesion); and it can contribute to communities feeling safe (thus contributing to community safety).

Moreover it does this without recourse to the 'hard power' sticks of coercion, authority, enforcement and sanctions, or the carrots of providing incentives or reward for involvement. This belies the assumption in many programmes that an external motivating force is needed to encourage participation. A more positive 'soft power' thesis, in which faith in people, of all ages, enjoying each other's company for its own sake is encouraged, may, it seems, be justifiably promoted. This might involve little more than creating and extending opportunities for people to become involved with each other.

Sustaining and transferring: what happens after the project?

Promoting a sustainable culture of conversation was an aim of the project. Although the nature of the project meant that this could not be systematically planned for in a way that would guarantee this outcome, there are some indicators of a legacy.

First, there was some evidence that the project had an effect on participants beyond their experience of it. For example:

I will never look at the police in the same way again.

Getting involved in the project connected me to [other] people in the village, not just young people. These gaps exist everywhere.

Having had experience of working in a philosophical way I talked about things in the same way with my friends.

In some cases, the relationships forged in the project persisted outside its context. A noteworthy example was the decision of those who had been involved in the intergenerational project to meet independently of its activities. With no intervention from project workers, young people (who had initially been invited to play a game of bowls at the care home as part of the project's activities) turned up the following, and subsequent, weeks. Moreover, the older people were glad to host them. There was some initial disquiet about this among some of the project workers but, through professional supervision, they concluded this was a positive outcome and it was not their place to seek to control the choices that had been made.

During the final evaluations of the project, it became clear that all those involved in the intergenerational project were concerned about its sustainability when the project came to an end. This led to efforts being made to resource a part-time volunteer co-ordinator to support the continuation of the group.

Important to sustainability, through the project's network a number of local people were encouraged to undertake training in the method

of Community of Enquiry. This was part of a deliberate strategy to support the development of facilitation skills locally, the premise being that local groups and organisations could, and would, integrate the methodology into their everyday activities. This was a key element of the project's aim to develop the capacity of the wider community to draw upon and benefit from the theories and practice of Community Philosophy. There is some evidence that this was successful:

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.

The project also received many enquiries from agencies interested in its work. The workers responded positively to requests for information and advice about how philosophy could be used elsewhere. The staff team agreed that, wherever possible, this contact would be based on encouraging others to actually participate in a Community of Enquiry. This proved positive with the staff of many agencies who celebrated learning through this experience and having what was, for many, a rare opportunity to think critically about their work. The project was thereby able to facilitate other agencies' thinking.

In one case, housing officers were helped to think about 'housing values'. This crystallised feelings that many had about tensions that arose from a clash of local cultural values and the policies of the housing trust, particularly in relation to the allocation of properties. Through dialogue, the housing officers realised that they often had *different* attitudes towards these tensions. On this basis, they all agreed that this was an issue further critical deserving attention.

The project also responded positively to enquiries from further afield. It supported and advised a range of agencies that had expressed interest in the methodology of Community Philosophy. These included a faith-based community development project in Bradford, a regeneration agency in Darlington and a housing agency in Oldham.

Key learning

Facilitating others' thinking led to a growing appreciation of the value of Community Philosophy as a social research tool. The discursive dimensions of Community of Enquiry mean it is capable of supporting the identification of social realities, as interpreted by those worked with. There is a clear potential for adding value to evidence-based policies and facilitating policy streams that are designed to engage with local context.

3 Discussion: what can we learn from these descriptions of practice?

‘Community Philosophy’ or ‘philosophical community work’?

In discussions about the project, the question ‘*Is Community Philosophy any more than good, philosophically-inspired, community work?*’ was sometimes posed and it is worthy of a response. It can be argued that good community work draws upon and is significantly influenced by a range of theories; it is an expression of theory in practice. This makes it unusual in a UK context, arguably, with its culture of valuing ‘doing’ above talking and thinking. Continental traditions, in contrast, tend more towards an acknowledgement that effectiveness comes from a significant level of integration of both theory and practice.

There is no dispute then about the importance of the integration of theory and practice. But what can be seen to distinguish Community Philosophy is its *systematic* use of theory as practice. It is here that the central methodology of Community of Enquiry becomes very important. Unlike philosophical community work this method emphasises and makes explicit the value and need for ‘dialogical virtues’. Great stress is put on committing to listening and allowing others to finish what they have to say – ‘turn-taking’ as participants in the project described it.

The key difference is that these rules of dialogue are overt and put into words; verbalised rather than assumed. Furthermore, its systematic use has the capacity to objectify and neutralise the issues being explored, thereby shifting the focus from the psychological to the philosophical, from feelings to reasoning. The dialogical process is made real and tangible. It becomes an activity in its own right, providing something for people to get their teeth into, something that they can name and describe. It can represent something meaningful, and be more likely to engage people for whom simply sitting down to chat does not represent a worthwhile investment of time. But of course, time

to invest must be available – this is perhaps why the project found that ‘time-rich’ younger and older people appeared more likely to be in tune with it than their ‘time-poor’ middle-aged counterparts.

The following comments illustrate the project’s philosophical character:

It has given people opportunities to be truthful and honest.

It’s OK to be confused.

This said, Community Philosophy does not insist upon the use of a textbook version of philosophical enquiry, as is sometimes found in the teaching of Philosophy for Children in schools. The use of a particular schema has to fit with the context in which the work takes place, not simply adapt to a preselected format. Sometimes this means structured philosophical enquiry will not be employed at all, with a preference being made for no more than the well-placed question that is a defining characteristic of philosophical community work.

Picking up on the project team’s own words, the external evaluators termed this a process of ‘naturalisation’ (Potter and Seeley, 2008 – see above). This means not being wedded to using the Community of Enquiry methodology; interventions used are constantly informed by changing circumstances – they evolve in harmony with the expressions of interest and influence of the community worked with.

In this sense, there are commonalities between Community Philosophy and philosophical community work. Both value dialogue highly, as a method through which we can achieve good thinking and thence good action. Critical to both forms of work is the investment of time, particularly in the development of trust-based relationships with the community. Whether these relationships are routinely found in all facets of community, for example within a school, is a matter of debate.

But it is certainly true that Community Philosophy's emphasis on mutuality, in which each becomes a teacher and student of the other, is rare.

The integration of philosophy into daily life faces further challenges, such as the scepticism often directed towards 'philosophy'. Philosophy, then, appears to need time to 'bed in'; people need time to claim it as something that is relevant to their lives, as something that they can own, rather than the preserve of an elite.

This process of continual evolution and naturalisation was not without its challenges, not least in respect of managing the work. Foremost was the challenge of moving away from a problem orientation; positive engagement with local people necessitated valuing people's interests as much as the issues and problems seen to afflict the community. That engagement should be valued regardless of the reason for it is supported by theories of social capital which suggest that a person's connectedness to their community is central to good health and well-being. Community Philosophy can generate this engagement, and seems to do so well.

It is worth reiterating that a naturalised Community Philosophy requires learning to value activities *for their own sake*. This represents a challenge to instrumentalist policy orientations that aim at improving life chances and social mobility in preference to promoting better living and well-being. The former tends to see interventions as ways to make a transition to a better future. But the latter, by taking into account the perspectives of those targeted, sees living and learning *for today* as equally prized.

That the idea of 'transition' is common in social policy is unsurprising, given its correlation with a dominant culture of outcomes. The idea that these are of the highest importance does not seem to have had the scrutiny it perhaps deserves. Community Philosophy begs important questions about wider values in society. Asking 'how can we live well today?' is less tangible and more difficult to measure but it may well render wider social benefits.

'Community Philosophy' or 'philosophy for communities'?

This distinction may appear pedantic but a tentative conclusion of the project is that such a distinction does exist. Perhaps the project's most significant learning is that applying traditional P4C models in a community setting does not truly cohere with what it is to work in a community context.

At the heart of this is the influence of different philosophies of education. Those that currently have most influence over formal education tend towards 'doing to' rather than 'working with', and the title 'P *for* C' (as distinct from 'P *with* C') leans towards perhaps a 'doing to' orientation. The fact that such pupils in school represent a 'captive audience' is part of this context.

The world of community work, on the other hand, influenced as it is by theories and philosophies of informal and community education, demands a more democratic approach. Workers must therefore be more responsive to the needs and wants of those they work with. As such, Community Philosophy can be seen as a mechanism for widening participation in decision-making at all levels – from choosing to get involved in the first place, to participating in the design and development of programmes, to deciding the extent to which outcomes might be translated into other actions. It has the capacity to accompany participants through a longer-term process; it looks beyond the session itself.

Part of this mix is the question '*Who knows what; and is it valued?*' Informal and community educators certainly value highly 'knowledge on the ground'. This is a world away from top-down models that see young people in particular as no more than, to use a Freirian theme, 'vessels to be filled'. Likewise, knowledge on the ground can be seen as a worthy foil to science-based theories of risk factors that may, at best, validate a disregard for popular knowledge, and, at worst, the coercion of those deemed 'needy'.

In short, the philosophical base of Community Philosophy accords a higher-order respect for community. It thus differs from other models of intervention that 'do to' or offer 'support' by way of a consumerist choice. Rather, Community

Philosophy has at its heart a creative model of philosophy in which those participating are themselves in control of their learning and destiny.

Philosophical management: learning to value uncertainty

As noted above, managing Community Philosophy can be challenging, particularly in respect of the need to accommodate 'naturalisation'. Community Philosophy may be inhibited, if not devalued, if its management is unsympathetic to the uncertain outcomes of the philosophical process.

The challenge for management, then, is the extent to which it can 'go with the flow', the extent to which prescription can be minimised. Taking a wider view of what constitutes transformation is the first step to this; creating a climate in which unanticipated outcomes can flourish is another. Managers need to appreciate that for Community Philosophy to be effective those practising it need a high degree of freedom and that the setting of organisational agendas can be in conflict with this. This can be described as the management of uncertainty.

Clearly, in a context of target-setting and prescribed outcomes this can be problematic. The project's experiences suggest that the 'institution' (as defined by a system or structure with a specified aim to fulfil) can, at times, inhibit community development and community learning.

The question 'What is it to philosophise?' can act as a watchword. From our experience, we would argue that Community Philosophy is a 'thinking process', and becoming familiar with process-oriented ways of working is useful. This includes valuing not being an expert; valuing not knowing; creating circumstances in which others can (both in real terms and metaphorically) 'complete the sentence'; and celebrating self-correction and the autonomy required to change one's mind.

Evaluation: form and function

Working in an open-ended way obviously makes it difficult to predetermine outcomes or even second-guess what these might be.

The project sought to learn from its process, by recording what happened, as it happened. This

can be contrasted with judging activities against predetermined performance criteria.

Central to this process of documentation was the use of the Community of Enquiry as an evaluation process in its own right; enquiries took place into what was good and bad about the activities, and the recommendations participants had for improvement. Various kinds of recordings were used, ranging from audio tapes and videos to note-taking, both during and after enquiries took place. These recordings were valuable for retaining the subtleties of the Community Philosophy process.

Community of Enquiry has other dimensions that are sympathetic to philosophically inspired evaluation. These include a culture in which participants expect and celebrate being challenged to give reasons for their opinions, adding to the quality of self- and peer assessment.

True to its community work ethos, the project also found that the best time for conducting evaluations was determined through negotiation and a respect for participants' judgement as to what worked best for them. At times, evaluations were conducted immediately after the activity, or were a concluding element of them. In others, evaluations were judged more productive when participants had had the opportunity to 'sleep on it' and were able to reflect in their own way and at their own pace in the interim period.

Promoting the philosophical virtues as part of a reflective dimension to the work demands that those involved are given time, support and encouragement. It might also be speculated that by working in this flexible way, the quality of the evaluation is superior to that emerging when timing is prescribed by a researcher's schedule.

Our experience suggests that for Community Philosophy to achieve success, it needs to be flexible, creative and adaptable. It is an effective medium for achieving outcomes, provided these are not obsessively prescribed in the first place, i.e. positive benefits appear to be based on allowing it to run its course.

As noted above, this can be at odds with the contemporary target-driven agenda. Where Community Philosophy is used as a mechanism to achieve certain objectives, therein lies the rub. Many organisations keen to demonstrate a commitment to community involvement see

this through an agenda-led lens. If Community Philosophy is to achieve its potential, organisational motivations must be put under scrutiny. Is the growing interest in Community Philosophy concerned with achieving prescribed goals or ticking a community involvement box? Or does it represent a commitment to authentic participation and democracy?

Perhaps the most revealing question is: 'What happens to the conclusions generated through Community Philosophy and Communities of Enquiry; is there a commitment to integrate this learning into service planning?'

A question of ethics

Perhaps inevitably, in a project that drew so heavily on philosophy, numerous ethical questions arose. At the centre of this was enquiring into what might be considered 'good work'. This has been the subject of much debate within both the project's Advisory Group and team meetings.

Among the conclusions drawn was that 'good work' should be authentic, i.e. be respectful of its community orientation and philosophical underpinnings. When working with people, their issues and their questions should be the focus of attention; 'good' is determined by those involved in the process. In this sense, 'good work' is democratic and involves risk-taking by the facilitators; they must have a positive attitude to the uncertainty implied by democracy. This takes us to a wider conclusion: working in this way implies mitigating external pressures, not least those of policy and strategy, and protecting the process of Community Philosophy from them.

Another major conclusion is that Community Philosophy should be based on a commitment to developing and maintaining trusting relationships with the host community. 'Good work' creates a climate in which this trust can lead participants to disclose not only their deeply held opinions (that in other circumstances they might be wary of sharing) but also the very personal experiences that have informed their world view.

The project also concluded that a commitment to caring (one of the '4 Cs' of Community of Enquiry) is essential if the work is to verify its ethics. At times, this might mean that what people say to each other, and where it might go thereafter,

needs to be made the subject of Community of Enquiry. At other times, caring may lead to a conclusion that it might be best not to pursue certain issues. For example, somebody who has recently been bereaved may not be in the emotional state necessary to critically analyse the concept of grief.

How the judgement is made as to whether an issue should be pursued or not is fraught with ethical considerations. The project tentatively concluded that a democratic ethic was necessary in these choices. Sometimes the very best thing to do is to take time to discuss with the group whether a topic should be pursued or not, and to trust in the community's collaborative ability to make this decision.

One example involved a group of older people embracing the opportunity to talk about death. This interest may have been directly related to escaping from a culture in which such a conversation is frowned upon; philosophical enquiry represented a rare space in which they could discuss such an issue. The challenge in this case was whether the facilitators could themselves escape this cultural norm and help the group discuss an issue that they had freely chosen and were motivated to explore. As such, the significant human demands made of facilitators should be acknowledged.

Moreover, it is important to note that it may well be the facilitators themselves who are struggling. The project team have commented that their experiences were sometimes emotionally draining. In one situation, a worker's own reflection on their family circumstances evoked such a strong emotional reaction that they recognised there were limitations to their capacity to facilitate the Community of Enquiry. This can be seen to reflect a further ethic, that those who are facilitating are, and have to be, part of the community.

Despite these challenges the project workers celebrated the philosophical orientation of the project. They reported that it had made them more philosophical in their daily lives, and that this had brought benefits as well as challenges.

4 Tools and techniques

The Community Philosophy embodied in this project appears to represent both a tool in community work and a methodology in its own right. As a tool, it has the potential to be used by a range of practitioners, especially in the field of community and youth work. Its relevance, however, extends to any area in which there is a commitment to community involvement in decision-making.

So far you will have a sense of what it is, how it was used, how it might be used, and the things to think about in so doing. This final section offers interested parties some practical advice in the use of Community Philosophy and how to integrate elements of it into their own practice.

Here, we look at the things that need to be in place and the techniques and resources that can be used. In presenting these, there is a big ‘but’. Because of the importance of being sympathetic to a naturalising process (in one context all of the elements of Community of Enquiry might be appropriate, while in another only a few might be relevant) it is unreasonable to offer a definitive ‘how to’ guide.

Preliminary questions: why Community Philosophy?

Although Community Philosophy has many uses, some clarity of purpose is important. 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?’, ‘How might I recreate this?’

Having confidence in the tool

Once these questions have been tackled, the most important thing is to become familiar and confident in using the approach. The training of workers in the facilitation of Community of Enquiry is considered essential and a number of courses

exist. Although none are yet specifically designed to meet the needs of those intent on *Community Philosophy*, a few programmes have been trialed and work is under way to create a more suited training regime and a parallel network to that now well established for Philosophy for Children.

The importance of planning

As with many interventions, the most important activity is planning. Although planning a session might appear at odds with the open-ended nature of Community Philosophy, this could not be further from the truth. The experience of the project is that having a strong plan for a given session gives the facilitator the confidence to take risks and celebrate uncertainty. This means that while putting the plan into action is how the session sets off, it may just as easily be disregarded should the community seek to pursue different interests. Equally, it can be returned to, as appropriate. However, without a plan, neither is possible.

The importance of setting

A first, and vital, consideration in shaping the plan is setting. In contrast to school-based P4C, where this might be non-negotiable, this can be significant – not least because the environment in which the work takes place can act as a stimulus and starting point for dialogue in its own right. It should be remembered that the quality of the dialogue is often affected by the environment.

Community of Enquiry

Thereafter, to be true to Community Philosophy is to have not only a good grasp of what might be called the ‘standard model’ of Community of Enquiry, but also a preparedness to chop and change, and write anew, as the work unfolds. Knowledge of this standard model itself represents

a formidable checklist of components. Typically, a series of stages are worked through.

Stages of a Community of Enquiry

- **Preparation:** if possible, consideration of the setting, but also simple tasks such as creating a circle of participants. There may also be some encouragement to participate in some pre-planned 'thinking' activities that can 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, where 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. not having definitive answers.
- **Selection of questions**, using a process to decide on the question to be answered. Sometimes this might simply be through voting but, if time allows, it might be possible to have further debate about the questions and attempt to make links or determine a further question that is sympathetic to the others.

Equally, as has been noted above, community conversations might have identified an issue which can then be formulated as a predetermined question which has the capacity to motivate people to attend organised enquiries. The example given above

is 'What is anti-social behaviour?'

- **First words**, where members of the group give their responses to the chosen question.
- **The enquiry**, which focuses on building: responses are invited to the initial contributions and, thereafter, there is a demand to build upon the comments made. This supports following the line of argument, i.e. the pursuit of the 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 the action, if any, that they imagine might be taken to integrate this new learning into everyday life. This might lead to a further enquiry on a particular issue that has emerged; it might mean recognising the need to develop some new knowledge or access some particular information; or it might be concerned with organising a campaign or some other form of practical action that the group is motivated to pursue.

- **Final words**, in which participants have an opportunity to reflect on the enquiry.

It is important to reiterate that the Community Philosophy process validates the extraction of any or all of these elements at any one time. Indeed, it is this flexibility and adaptability that is its hallmark if it is to be truly sympathetic to the essential naturalising process that ensures that people are 'worked with' rather than 'done to'.

The importance of reflection

Reflection, is a feature of community work generally and absolutely essential to Community Philosophy. Reflection helps the facilitator to understand how the methodology is interpreted and used by those they work with; in essence it invokes a feeling for what is happening. Acting on this reflection, the facilitator can then make the changes demanded of working to a democratic ethic.

Reflection is equally important for the participants. Each activity should plan for it, albeit that it should not be insisted upon. Where the activity has generated a high level of adrenaline, it may well be that reflection best occurs at this time, enabling feelings and ideas to be captured and made sense of. But immediate reflection will not always be the best thing to do. If a stimulus has generated a good deal of uncertainty, a sense of bewilderment or even confusion, it may be that 'sleeping on it' is more productive.

Reflection may also need to take a different form for different groups; there may be times when the best thing to do is for the worker and the group to come together in joint reflection, others when it is best to reflect separately. There is no one answer; as with so much in Community Philosophy, what is required is preparation and also thought, flexibility and a democratic ethos.

Community Philosophy: a crib sheet

What are the 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 is democratic and democratises.
- It examines and scrutinises perceived wisdom and community norms.

What needs does Community Philosophy meet?

- It engages with – and seeks solutions to – real-world issues and problems in a purposefully analytical way.
- It effectively engages and supports the participation of communities – especially young people deemed 'hard to reach'.

What are the benefits of Community Philosophy?

- It promotes good thinking.
- It promotes good acting.
- It supports learning.

What are the measures of Community Philosophy's success?

- If it is used in a cyclical way rather than as a 'one-off', i.e. enquiry breeds enquiry.
- If positive outcomes are identified by participant self-assessment, community evaluation and wider networks of stakeholders, especially when evaluation takes the form of a Community of Enquiry.
- If it increases community responsibility, especially for the welfare, socialisation and education of young people.
- If it is used more widely as a tool and as a discrete activity.
- If it is integrated into the wider practical implementation of social policy.

What support does Community Philosophy need?

- Open-minded partners who are prepared to take risks and value uncertainty in the pursuit of good outcomes.
- Flexible and democratic practice; a commitment to 'philosophical management'.
- Belief in young people as people – not problems.

5 Concluding remarks

Is it possible to distil everything said in this report into just a few key concluding remarks? Let us try.

Community Philosophy needs to be recognised as distinctive from Philosophy for Communities and, more so, Philosophy for Children. Its distinctiveness lies in its possessing a philosophical base grounded in that of informal and community education. Central to this is an ethos that celebrates community, celebrates conversation as an expression of this, and celebrates the uncertainty that this implies.

Democracy is cross-cutting. This document refers to this as a process of naturalisation: through a constant process of reflection the work becomes sympathetic to, and in tune with, the community it works with. Their experiences and 'knowledge on the ground' are considered primary resources. And this needs to accommodate an appreciation that, for some at least, its value is social, and for its own sake; it is an expression of their desire to live today rather than be beholden to a future orientated toward 'transition'. Yet, ironically, Community Philosophy appears to have the capacity not just to initiate, encourage and sustain community conversations but also to catalyse action that can be transformative of individuals, groups and wider communities.

While it might be easy to judge that 'the method won't work', especially where institutional pressures are great, there are significant potential gains. In this sense, we might speculate on the value of Community Philosophy in wider social policy. Community Philosophy could have a role to play in the promotion of community cohesion, particularly between the generations; and, in so doing, could boost essential social capital. Furthermore, it could act as a powerful stimulus for the democratisation of decision-making systems and, indeed, education itself; and, given the value of transferable thinking skills and dispositions, it could stimulate learning and benefits in other areas of life.

Naturally, there are pitfalls, things to avoid. A lack of philosophical management is one example of something constraining, as is the identification of Community Philosophy as simply a mechanism through which certain, prescribed agendas can be 'delivered'.

Perhaps the most significant point of all is that Community Philosophy represents a break from a culture of pessimism about the capacity of communities. Such a culture almost inevitably has a problem orientation. People, especially young people, are considered 'at risk', 'vulnerable', even 'dangerous', and the aim is to 'fix them'. In contrast, Community Philosophy is a distinctly respectful and pro-social social encounter.

For some, it may represent a tool, for others it will represent something more substantive. But for all, it represents something positive about possibility and human potential. Were it written into the fabric of our public services it might end up ticking many boxes, even though we might not know what these boxes are when that dialogue begins. Perhaps, like much in philosophy, it simply begs another question; in this case, a question for our time:

Might we get better outcomes if we were just a bit more philosophical?

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
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Graeme Tiffany
Project Director

About the author

Graeme Tiffany has a background in youth work, community education and community development. Since 2000, he has been a freelance researcher, trainer, lecturer and education consultant with special interests in detached and street-based youth work, informal education, participation and the use of philosophical tools to support learning. In addition to his work as Project Director of the JRF *Community Philosophy Project*, Graeme also leads a philosophy-inspired Community Cohesion programme for Sunderland City Council.

As Vice-Chair of the Federation for Detached Youth Work, Graeme represents the UK in *Dynamo International*, an international network of street educators. He is the author of *Reconnecting Detached Youth Work: Guidelines and Standards for Excellence* (2007) and *Learning from detached youth work: democratic education* (2008), published by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education, for which he has been a Core Group member and advisor to its *Engaging Youth Enquiry*.

Graeme has recently enrolled as a part-time PhD student at the Institute of Education, University of London, where he will continue his research into civil and democratic education.