Community Philosophy and Social Action

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Abstract

Achieving transformation through philosophy-inspired social action, at whatever level, is likely to remain a theoretical pursuit unless it is grounded in democratic processes. Bringing the concepts of 'community' and 'philosophy' together implies, in practice, philosophical endeavour in public and non-institutional settings. A geographical and temporal analysis is demanded: what constraints do these settings impose on the practice of philosophy? What opportunities do they unlock? Therein, Community Philosophy aims to be a context-appreciative practice, such that the relative freedoms of working in communities (in contrast to institutions) can be benefited from. Trust and investment in the social and relational aspects of community life, in participation and collaboration, are needed. Community Philosophy becomes an essentially democratic process rather than a product-oriented undertaking, and it is this that creates the possibility of social action and meaningful change.

Keywords

Community Philosophy; Social action; Democratic; Political; Participation; Collaboration.

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Introduction

In describing the development of Community Philosophy(CP) in chapter 1 of this volume, Steve Bramall compares CP with Philosophy for Children (P4C). Whilst both practices might engage with the concept of action, he suggests that action is a specific intention of CP, and the same cannot be said of P4C.

Bramall is careful in suggesting the need for an expansive account of 'action', including even the simple act of 'changing one's mind'. Likewise, I'd say: 'talking *is* a form of action', in a deliberate attempt to push back at the popular adage that suggests otherwise. In this sense we might say dialogue is a pre-requisite of the thinking that propels action. This chapter aims to develop this account, by considering particularly the role CP plays (and might play) in imagining, informing and catalyzing the wider notion of 'social action'.

A starting point is to recognize that relatively little has been written about CP, at least in comparison to P4C. Of course, this book seeks to address this issue. We might conclude CP is relatively new, whereas the history of P4C, from its origins in the work of Matthew Lipman in the 1960s and 1970s (see also Lipman 1991), is both well developed and well documented. And yet, accounts of 'social action'-oriented work pre-date both, having long been an important part of the lexicon of community workers, including youth workers, adult educators and social workers (Twelvetrees 2017). Such references tend to mark these social practitioners as 'radical' and 'progressive', and as 'political actors' (Alinsky 1971; Coady 1980; Lovett 1988; Thompson 1980), whereas other educators – typically school teachers – are cast more in a neutral light. In the interpretation of these practices, the

emphasis is typically on 'action': it is this that shapes it as political. It is much less common for the 'social' to be ascribed political value, which is precisely what I want to do here.

'Social' is a relational concept, which implies a moral and ethical context. Therein, social action is a process in which groups of people (rather than individuals) engage, to determine what might, could and should be done, whether through informal or bureaucratic means. It is the social that renders it political, albeit in the broadest sense of the word – politics with a small 'p', as some may say. This further invokes questions about participation and democracy, which are particularly pertinent to Community Philosophy.

Philosophy and Social Action: Freedoms and Constraints

Community Philosophy emerged as a critical response to a number of issues identified by informal and community educators and community development workers interested in the practices of Philosophy for Children (P4C), and those of (the much less common) Philosophy for Communities and Philosophy *with* Communities (PwC). A concern for participation and democracy motivated much of the work undertaken by many in developing Community Philosophy.

We might start with what's implied by the word 'with'. It would seem to suggest a more concerted commitment to the development of a participatory culture, even though P4C and Philosophy for Communities are routinely articulated in participatory terms. In linking participatory practices to social action (or at least the potential for social action) it becomes necessary to evaluate the claims made about working in a participatory way. Here, geography provides a tool for analysis, in the sense of the freedoms and constraints engendered by the space in which philosophical practices occur. We might think of 'institutional' and 'non-institutional' settings, and appreciate then the profound distinction

between places of formal education (in the case of P4C, typically schools) and the myriad sites of informal and community education, from cafés and community centres, to the street, and so on.

Obviously enough, these spaces function differently. Whereas (albeit with the notable exception of those home-schooled) children and young people have to go to school (which in turn validates curriculum-based models of learning), no such compulsion exists in non-institutional settings, either to be present or to engage in the activities organized therein. The context is one of voluntary association: what happens, by necessity, is subject to negotiation. Conversely, those seeking to develop philosophical practices in institutional settings are constrained not just by the compulsory context but also by its practical manifestations (which are both geographical and temporal in character). Think of the symbolic effect of walls, and contrast this with the provocation provided by French street social workers, who deliberately aim to work 'sans murs' – without walls.

These thematics provide a further and important contrast: institutional contexts tend to have defined spatial boundaries and prescribed temporalities. The most obvious example is, again, school, which is typically understood as a building, with a regimen of time, from the 'school day', to defined lesson times. For those working in non-institutional settings, practices are much more fluid in terms of time, the epitome of which is street-based youth work and social work, which both tend to happen *when* clients need it. Practitioners in these fields also aim to be geographically mobile; they move around, in view of the fact that those they seek to engage and work with are similarly mobile. For them, effective practice relies on flexibility; it needs to be as free of constraint as possible. As such, it is described as 'low threshold': everything possible is done to make the workers, and therefore the services they offer, accessible and so remove barriers to engagement.

The parallels with social action are obvious: for it to be possible, the context in which it sits needs to be as free of constraint as possible. Equally, the fact that P4C is so often physically and temporally-bounded, and Community Philosophy is often not, raises questions beyond the possibility of philosophy-inspired social action; how can the values claims of such practices, whether to equality, social justice, or democracy, be realized; and, practically, what form should these practices take for social action to become possible in the first place?

What follows is an attempt to chart the emergence of Community Philosophy based on my own experience, and that of Community Philosophers with whom I have worked. I am well aware others have done similar things: see, for example, Evans and Dixon's wide-ranging review of grassroots philosophy (2012). And yet my aim here is to expand on the notion of Community Philosophy-inspired social action, and to show how thinking about the issues raised above has informed its practice. I am selective on this basis alone. The examples given will consider constraints, challenges and the conditions necessary to advance the values identified. Philosophically-inspired pedagogies and methodologies are given particular prominence, as is the argument that all philosophical practices need to be grounded in a wider conceptualisation of democratic practice. This prompts wider observations, about what might influence change at a local, societal (and perhaps even global) level.

I hope all this has resonance for other educators and social practitioners in its conclusion that the theory and practice of Community Philosophy 'shines a light' on substantive questions in the philosophy of education, and especially those relating to education for equality, social justice and democracy.

Community Philosophy: Background and Borrowings

In 1994, having been influenced by my experience of working with the Adult Learning Project (ALP)[i] in Edinburgh, Scotland, I wrote a paper for the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) (Tiffany 1994a). On an occasional basis, NIACE produced special editions, in this case dedicated to 'Young Adults Learning'. The paper described efforts to create and employ a practice, inspired by Paulo Freire, in youth work settings. Of concern at the time (and a concern I hold to this day) was to create an educational experience that did not invoke the response: 'It's like school'. I can say with conviction that, as a youth worker, I have rarely worked with young people for whom such a statement implied something good. I have always wondered what it is about school that leads to such negativity amongst so many.

To my mind, the crux of the matter then (and now) is the lack of a participative culture, in which young people have at least some power to inform decisions as to what, and how, they learn. So often they are cast as consumers of education, rather than creators or co-creators of learning. Mark Smith's seminal little book: *Creators and Consumers* (1982) undoubtedly influenced generations of youth workers, as did Freire's work. The premise is clear, and teased out in Jeffs and Smith's (1990; 1999) defence of working without the framework of a 'curriculum', at least in the sense of a 'course to be run'[ii] (that is, determined by others).

Inspired by my experience of working at ALP, I designed a range of Freire-influenced, question-focussed, methodologies for use in my work with young people. I was struck by how often those who experienced them stated, appreciatively, 'We never get asked questions like this at school'. Indeed, some said they never got asked questions at all. However, there were more than a few who were sceptical about the process: these young

people seemed to think this was just another form of the manipulation they believed they had been subjected to in school. This became apparent to me when, having offered the young people the opportunity to decide upon questions about an image I presented to them (obtained from a friend who, as a photo-journalist, took pictures for the local newspaper) they queried the choice of image. I realized that despite the freedom extended to 'ask anything' they sensed that there was something 'going on'.

Smith's influence on my and other youth workers' practice was such that we aimed to treat young people's perceptions respectfully, as forms of truth. I resolved to offer multiple images and invite a choice of these in advance of any discussion about the questions we might explore. I placed thirty or so photographs face down on the floor and asked the group to select one of them. That I had to do this to demonstrate I wasn't trying to manipulate them seemed extraordinary, but necessary given the extent of their negative experiences. I became even more convinced that what I have since called a 'generative phase' is essential in Community Philosophy; that simply being involved in generating the questions to be enquired into is, in and of itself, a form of social action.

The same can be said of talking. Community Philosophy contests the criticism: 'all talk and no action'. Voicing, and testing, our ideas and aspirations – in conversation – actively subjects them to criticism and stimulus. It helps us think about decisions made, and those we intend to make; and sometimes we change our mind:

> 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' (Tiffany, 2009: 13–14).

These are all forms of action, and constitute territory conducive to social action. In *Freire for Young Adults*, I provided an example to show the connectedness of these forms of action:

> My methodology was to encourage the 'decoding' of these images by an initial brainstorming session to draw out ideas generated by the photograph. Thereafter, by facilitating dialogue on common themes, contentious issues and conflicting opinions, people's perspectives on everyday situations would not only become apparent to others but would become clearer to the participants themselves. My intention was to stress the need to link thinking with action, in such a way that the group would seek further discussion, learning or an experience in order to act on their deliberations. We would work cyclically. One session would be spent on reflection, dialogue, and deciding on a form of action. The following week we would participate in this action and then reflect in and on this action (Tiffany, 1994a: 65).

In the same piece, I spoke about how I'd placed the photographs, face down, on a table and invited a young person to choose one. To me, the photograph was of two boys wearing singlets and waist ribbons, garb I associated with boxing. I asked the group to come up with words that the image brought to mind. They responded with, amongst others, 'fighting', 'violence', 'aggro', 'fear', and 'getting a good hiding'. Then I asked if the responses they'd generated had anything in common. It became clear that what they said was based on shared experiences, of situations they'd been in where they were exposed to violence, felt in fear, and had come to harm. A number of these stories related to 'going down town' where they would often come into contact with groups of young people from other

neighbourhoods. Our discussion moved on to the factors that might lead to violence, and how those present dealt with fear. Comments included: 'It depends on how much you've had to drink' and 'It depends on if you are with your mates'. Soon we were talking about decision-making in a context of fear. The group agreed this was something we should discuss further, and that it would be interesting to do so. Having already explained that the design of the project included identifying activities that would help us to learn, it was suggested that we might do something adventurous, something that felt risky enough to frighten people. And so we decided to go sea-cliff climbing [the young people lived next to the sea, and were aware these cliffs existed]. The article related what happened:

> The experience was strangely different from other outdoor activities we had undertaken together. Firstly, more of the group joined in than normal. Then there was a tangible air of purpose: we were going climbing for a particular reason. It was part of a whole, the second half of something we had begun the previous week. Throughout the day we talked about fear, about how we dealt with it ourselves, how we behaved towards others who were fearful themselves, and how all this affected our attitude to self and others. The day, we agreed, had been thoroughly enjoyable and very worthwhile (ibid).

Whilst what I wrote then is now a quarter of a century old, I continue to think it was an important experiment in what I'd later describe as 'philosophy-inspired social action'. It certainly meant I was receptive when I later discovered the world of Philosophy for Children. And yet, as a youth worker, my experience of P4C generated more questions than answers. Amongst these were those relating to the autonomy of participants, and the sense in which autonomy – as self-determination – is a fundamental expression of action: what processes, what pedagogies and what methodologies were needed if the autonomy of

participants was to be respected, encouraged and facilitated? And then there was the issue of *social* action: how might the actions of individuals marry with those of a community? I've grappled with this particular question for a number of years, drawing at least tentative conclusions in a critique of the value of personal autonomy, in which I theorized the self as a socially-constructed identity, necessarily lived out through social action (Tiffany 1994b). There are elements here I'm sure that are relevant to the practice of Community Philosophy.

Autonomy, Self-Determination, Action and Social Action

Accounts of P4C often refer to a series of steps, or stages, in the use of a Community of Enquiry methodology (see for example, Dialogueworks' 4 Phase Inquiry Method). In this, enquiries typically culminate with 'Last Words'[iii]. Arguably, what participants learn through the experience of this methodology changes them: they may have acquired additional knowledge, have developed further skills, or new and enhanced values and virtues. All are important. However, whilst learning is reasonably equated with change, it is something else to say it constitutes action. This would require the application of such knowledge and/or skills and the active demonstration of these values and virtues. Where the end of an enquiry constitutes an end in and of itself, we can only hope that this learning reveals itself later, and manifests itself in action. It seems only logical to employ methodology that deliberately creates space and time for action to occur. In maintaining a commitment to 'community', this logic extends to *that* community being encouraged and supported in taking action *as a community*: implying *social* action. What are the methodological implications? Shouldn't we build in the question: 'How might our deliberations inform and catalyze social action (and in the sense of real and practical change)?'

With these thoughts in mind, I'd want to argue that Community Philosophy adds a step, or stage, in which time is set aside to explore what action that community might take, on the basis of the conclusions drawn from its enquiry. We might go even further: where the taking of this action, and subsequent reflection on it, constitute and become further 'steps'.

Again, we might reflect on the impact of institutional settings. Take school: how often are the conclusions drawn by pupils in P4C translated into social action, or even imagined as being able to inform social action? Is this even encouraged? Fundamentally, what changes do they effect? Could we imagine, for example, an enquiry into the reasonableness of school uniform ever leading to its abandonment?

Intriguingly, the enquiries I have facilitated with young people (a label I give them on the basis of engagement in non-institutional settings) have often concluded that pupils (as they are referred to in school) are virtually powerless, precisely because of the institutional context in which they are they are present. And this is despite the fashionable talk of 'pupil voice' and 'participation', and the existence of structures such as school councils.

It becomes obvious then that the institutional context has a profound influence on the potential and possibility of Community of Enquiry methodology to inform, catalyse, and indeed facilitate, social action. Indeed, the institutional context appears to actively constrain it. Or perhaps not?

The Case of the Wandering Prisoner

I've certainly observed (what I've argued constitutes) the most basic form of action in schools: pupils changing their minds. Schools seem to exert little or no constraint on that. If viewed in the sense of 'self-correction', changing one's mind, on the basis of a rigorous

process, of evidence-gathering, and enquiry into reasonableness, is undoubtedly valuable. But what of other inhibitors, and the constraints they present? Of these, one only came to mind given an experience of working in a prison.

I had been facilitating an enquiry amongst inmates involved in a philosophy-inspired prison education programme. All seemed well, and our conversation appeared of interest to all present. And yet, after around half an hour or so, one of the inmates got up and, without a word, simply walked out of the room. No-one batted an eyelid, including the two prison educators present. So, I and those remaining continued our discussion. A short while later, the inmate returned. Again, there was no reaction; the group simply carried on.

This case of the wandering prisoner contributed a nuanced perspective and greater understanding of how institutional environments affect enquiry-based methodology. It seems to me (an analysis if you like) that here was someone expressing his autonomy, taking action in a tangible way.

I found out later that the philosophy sessions were one of a series of choices that existed within the time set aside each day for prisoners to engage in educational activities. These were not mandated: inmates chose to engage with these activities, or not. There was no obligation to participate, or indeed to be present for the entirety of the time these sessions lasted. What struck me later was the near impossibility of a school pupil not so much behaving in this way but being allowed to. The question then is to what extent is action (whether autonomous, freely-chosen, individual, or social) possible within institutional settings, where respect for autonomy is clearly not a given. More fundamentally, can there be action without such autonomy?

P4C and the 'Captive Audience' versus the Freedom of Community

Whether disenchanted school teachers, trying to re-kindle the values that brought them into teaching in the first place; educators for whom democracy is all-important; or those more therapeutically-minded, who see benefits to self, others and society from people saying what they feel and think, there are many aspirant facilitators of philosophical enquiry. Schools, naturally, become an attractive place to practice in: there are children aplenty to practice on.

The opportunities in school would seem abundant; and yet, as we have seen, there are constraints. We might add to these the pressures of the curriculum, which often mean there are few opportunities for philosophical enquiry. Likewise, for the 'external' facilitator: gaining access can be hard enough especially when so little time exists for doing something 'different'. So why do so many advocates of public philosophy persist in trying to get into schools? Perhaps there is a cultural assumption that school is the obvious place to be: it is where young people are, after all? Perhaps also it's assumed that engagement is going to be unproblematic; that the setting will see to that.

It takes a comparison with work in non-institutional settings to reveal some of the tensions. A provocation comes in reflecting on the voluntary context that defines such settings. In community settings access cannot be taken for granted. Nor engagement. There are no captive audiences. The Community Philosopher has to work for their relationships; community work skills become as important as the philosophical. The prize though is that certain freedoms follow on. It's as if there is an inversion of effort: whilst in institutional settings the philosopher might be able to embark on their activities quite soon, but be faced with untold work to facilitate action, in community settings the effort comes first, and life and the possibility of action is easier thereafter.

Working in the street is the quintessential metaphor. I've asked teachers, 'If the walls of your classroom fell down (if it became like the street), what would you do, and would you [have to] teach differently?' A common conclusion is that acting upon pupils – 'doing to' –, is very different from 'working with'. Few teachers advocate the former, and yet few are immune to the pressures on them to 'deliver' the curriculum. They appreciate that a tension (to say the least) exists between directing pupils and facilitating their autonomy – helping them take action in terms *they*, either as individuals or as a community, determine.

What emerges are further questions, many of which continue to have spatial and temporal dimensions: might other spaces be better suited to philosophical enquiry? Is there somewhere other we can escape from the time-controlling bell? Might then philosophical practices in non-institutional, perhaps public, settings actually have greater potential for informing, catalysing and facilitating social action? Among a range of intentions, the Thinking Village project aimed to tackle these questions. Its activities are examined next.

'The Thinking Village': An Experiment in Community Philosophy-Informed Social Action

'The Thinking Village' project was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)[iv] and ran from 2006 until 2009. The three and a half-year experimental 'Demonstration Project' used Community Philosophy to promote conversations and develop positive relationships between different groups of people and professional groupings across a distinct geographical community. That said, decisions as to where the work took place were influenced by the rationale that:

> 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 (Tiffany, 2009: 9).

There was a particular emphasis on inter-generational work, and on creating 'a conversational bridge between the young people in the community and the decision-making structures with which they were rarely directly involved' (ibid.: 14). These conversations were to provide a medium for learning, to enable groups to work together and examine problems (including those related to conflict and controversial issues), and act as a stimulus and catalyst for action and the 'democratisation of community life' (ibid.: 5). In particular, they broadened the base of participation, and generated 'enough momentum to enable dialogue to become self-sustaining' (ibid.: 10). It is important to state that action took place where considered appropriate, and this was freely chosen.

In practice, the 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 concerns in the early days of the project. Shortly after the arrival of the project, a Dispersal Order was served on the neighbourhood. This gave police the power (in a designated area) to disperse groups of two or more people 'where their presence resulted, or is likely to result, in a member of the public being harassed, intimidated, alarmed or distressed'[v]. 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 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 was how they were policed on the streets: many felt they were unfairly treated. When the dialogue turned to what action might be taken, the group came up with 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 were posed to a range of stakeholders (including the police) who had been involved in the discussions about anti-social behaviour. A participating Police Officer said they were 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 (Tiffany 2009: 12).

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 an active philosophy group, 'P4U'. The group met fortnightly and took part in a wide range of activities including inter-generational dialogues.

Some Reflections

The project found a relationship between controversial issues and high levels of community engagement and involvement. Local people welcomed Community Philosophy as a means to discuss these issues, and contrasted it with community meetings that had turned into 'shouting matches' about who was to blame for the problems experienced. Many recognized that these meetings often exacerbated existing fractures in the community, and even created new ones. Of note were the comments made about social action; discussing what local people could do, as part of the process of enquiry, was regarded a progressive alternative to investing faith in others to sort things out. The latter was seen as weakening a community's ability to solve its own problems (Tiffany 2009).

This emphasis on discussing the possibility of social action (and what form it might take) became a central part of the project's work. Many of these discussions led to conclusions about what practical action was needed. A particular example was of the action catalysed by an enquiry into 'anti-social behaviour':

> 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 antisocial behaviour. The project worked to bring different parties together to discuss the issue in order to gain agreements and resources to create new opportunities (ibid.: 14).

Elizabeth Alley, a participant in the project, mentions Community Philosophy (and makes specific reference to social action) in her reflections on life in the village (Alley 2009):

> At the discussion on community spirit held by the Community Philosophy Project we considered how life is breathed into communities when there is something to celebrate. This conclusion had been drawn from time invested in concept-analysis (as important a role as might be imagined for philosophy): 'How should 'spirit' be defined? Its derivation from the Latin *spirare* is useful in this context. For what characterizes the 'real community' is its breath of life, its animation' (ibid.: 163).

Later, Elizabeth describes her own and others' enjoyment of activities organized by the project, such as a series of inter-generational activities, including excursions. It's important to note that the decision to organize these activities emanated from the enquiries community members participated in, as in the example above as to what constituted 'community spirit'. The facilitators deliberately included a social action element in their methodology, and asked: 'On the basis of our discussions, what actions might we take?' Subsequent discussions concluded the need for activities, with the hope that they'd animate community life. Project workers then worked alongside members of the community to organize these activities. Many were followed by further enquiries into the experience participants had had, in further attempts to draw out community learning and make links with social action.

Further examples of Community Philosophy-inspired social action can be found in the project report. For now, what's important is to reiterate the process by which action becomes possible:

> 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 (Tiffany, 2009: 26).

And it is this that acts as provocation to the wider world of public philosophy: what happens to the conclusions generated through Community Philosophy and Communities of Enquiry?

With this question in mind, it's worth reflecting on the social action that the project as a whole catalyzed. Certainly, the report proved a stimulus for discussion within a loose network of people interested in Community Philosophy and its future. Significantly, there was a realisation that the potential existed for others to learn from the Thinking Village project such that they might work in similar ways. The idea of developing a Community Philosophy Facilitator training course emerged from this discussion.

Community Philosophy Facilitator Training: Promoting Social Action Elsewhere

In 2012, a group of people with a shared interest in public philosophy came together with the aim of developing a training course for those wishing to facilitate Community Philosophy. This work was supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation[vi], administered by SAPERE[vii] and informed by what had been learnt from 'The Thinking Village' project.

The process of creating a course involved a thorough review of the philosophical and practice-based foundations of Community Philosophy, the development of a trial training course, and subsequent participatory evaluation with course participants who had attempted to integrate what they'd learnt into their practice. Their comments further refined the detail of the course. Graduates of the course went on to use Community Philosophy in a wide variety of ways, and in a range of community settings. A good deal of

their work demonstrated a social action dimension. Examples of this were written up in the form of case studies, so as to provide a resource for others to learn from. One in particular showed how significant this social action dimension could be.

The Powell-Cotton Museum Case Study

One of those who undertook the Community Philosophy Facilitator training course was Keiko Higashi. Keiko described her experience as a Project Manager at a museum in 'Tea, Cake and Conversation: Creating a Community at the Powell-Cotton Museum' (Brown and Higashi 2015). Her paper provides a wonderful example of how Community Philosophy informed and initiated social action, and shaped the very fabric of a museum and its activities.

Keiko's account details attempts to increase access to the museum, develop awareness of its collection, diversify its audience and highlight research. First, conversations were initiated with staff. These (and commentary from a past review of the museum) highlighted poor communication and coordination. This was seen as hampering the progress of projects, creating distrust and a lack of sustainability.

Keiko and another Project Manager, Sarah Brown, resolved to create a sense of community, ownership, sustainability, collaborative working and positive developments in the museum. They viewed Community Philosophy as a means to support both thinking and action. A series of philosophical discussions was held about how a particular gallery (due for a make-over) could and should be used, and might be made to feel and look. Transcripts of the discussions were shared with designers and these fundamentally influenced the design of the gallery. Keiko recalls what happened in her paper:

> From early discussions with staff and volunteers, the project Managers realized that there was a real fear that the new contemporary design would lose the identity and essence of the museum's history. These concerns were taken on board and fed back to the designers as something that needed to be considered. As a result, a key visual aspect of the design was to reuse and restore the old cabinets and storage crates that had been kept behind the scenes at the museum since its opening over a century ago. When revealed at a progress briefing, there was a great response from staff and volunteers, who could see that their concerns and ideas had been listened to.
>
> One particular discussion, 'Are we here to entertain or to educate?' proved seminal. Staff and volunteers spoke of their perception that the museum had a bias for educated people, and the assumption that the new gallery would be used by academics and scientists. Thoughts turned to what was needed to create a space where anyone can be a researcher without a hierarchy of learning styles. In other words, learning through touch and play would have the same priority as scientific study (Brown and Higashi 2015: 110–111).

Not only had the design of the gallery been substantively informed by Community Philosophy, but a philosophical approach had 'spread into the day-to-day life of the museum and [is] used to raise sensitive topics or resolve conflicting opinions' (ibid.).

It's clear that this and the previous examples illustrate well the capacity of Community Philosophy to catalyze both tangible and practical action and cultural change. It's clear also that time has to be invested in thinking specifically about what actions might be taken and this should be informed by the conclusions that communities draw from their enquiries. The reference to cultural change is important. Keiko's account repeatedly

mentions the significance of Community Philosophy's emphasis on collaboration as a driver for change and action. She speaks a lot of sharing (especially knowledge, and how this knowledge transfer should be a 'two-way experience'), and of ensuring that people's concerns and ideas were listened to. This involved the existence of feedback loops, the building of trust (undeniably, a relational concept) and a sense of ownership, and ultimately the idea that all participants (whether professionals, volunteers, or visitors) were co-curators. Pertinent also were efforts to establish an egalitarian environment; this is perhaps best evidenced by a comment on the museum's Facebook page which spoke of volunteers and staff being 'pro-children'. A wonderful anecdote exists of parents complaining that it was difficult to extract their children from the new gallery, such was their enthusiasm for it. And that this was reflected in unprecedented 'dwell time', a metric for measuring visitor engagement.

A series of tentative conclusions can be drawn: Community Philosophy appears to validate participatory activities, even among cynics, who come to see its capacity to dig deeper, reveal truths, and build community, which, in combination, foreground real and lasting change in both practical and cultural terms. We might start to consider now social action and the question of scale.

Action that Changes the World: A Question of Scale?

It's implicit that the aim of social action is to effect change, whatever the form that might take. It's easy to be sceptical, and even cynical, here in doubting whether such action can lead to change, and especially change that it is meaningful and valuable. The risk is in concluding that social action is impossible or meaningless and not worth pursuing. Concern for scale can be the most significant inhibitor, especially when, as Henningsen (2010)

suggests, a ‘Romantic ethic’ can exist, in which workers and activists are intent on ‘changing the world’. This is where earlier references to Freire’s ideas can act as inhibitors too, given his many references to tackling social justice and emancipatory politics, which can seem to many too grand an aspiration to warrant serious commitment. This might explain why there is a general fondness for Freire’s ideas, but relatively few examples of deliberate attempts to put his philosophies into practice.[viii] What if we were to consider first a different scale of endeavour?

Thoughts on this are offered by de St. Croix in her study of youth work as community action (2016), which, notably, used Community Philosophy as a research methodology. She references Holloway’s (2002) treatise on practical anarchism, which argues that it’s possible to change the world without taking power, and recognizes this in her observations of the often minor ways in which youth workers take action. For her, these are not insignificant actions, rather these workers’ practice demonstrates everyday forms of resistance, including deliberate inaction:

It does not only encompass mass collective forms of action such as large demonstrations and occupations, it includes what is sometimes referred to as ‘everyday’ or ‘micro’ resistance (Weitz, 2001: Thomas and Davies, 2005a, 2005b). My aim here is not to privilege everyday resistance over more ambitious and collective forms of activism, but rather acknowledge the importance of localized and subtle actions and inactions at a time when workers are governed in decentralized ways. In everyday forms of activism, people use the tools at their disposal to speak or act for what they believe is right and against what they see as wrong. It could be that ‘these everyday, apparently trivial, individual acts of resistance offer the potential to spark social change and, in the long run, to shift the balance of power between social groups (Weitz, 2001, p. 670) (de St Croix, 2016: 182).

De St. Croix's work is relevant here as it paints a powerful picture of the multiplicity of behaviours that can constitute action, and the different levels at which it can occur. Another way to look at this, and in keeping with Community Philosophy's democratic roots, is that the facilitator should steadfastly *not* make any assumptions about the form of action communities should take, or even whether action is appropriate or valuable in the first place. Rather, their role is to support enquiry into this possibility, such that it is freely determined and chosen by that community, or indeed even rejected. This role extends to encouraging those involved to test the ideas generated. The ethic is one of autonomy enhancement: which in and of itself can be understood through the prism of action. There are inevitable ethical questions, risks perhaps in working in this way: what if the community determines it wants to engage in action that goes against the facilitator's principles? It seems reasonable to say that philosophical enquiry and particularly Community of Enquiry methods inherently offer a range of safeguards and protections. Anecdotally at least, those working with Community Philosophy have never reported experiences of groups that contemplated anything oppressive. Far from it; in emphazising the caring and collaborative thinking commonly associated with the method of Community of Enquiry, the process appears robust enough to withstand manipulation. Furthermore, the intensely participatory nature of Community Philosophy functions to ensure critique of whatever action is imagined. This notion of Community Philosophy as a participatory process lends itself, as de St Croix shows, to the wider world of participatory action research.

'The Touch Project' and Community Philosophy as Participatory Action Research

The Touch Project was a two-year European research project into youth violence. It represented an opportunity to test the use of Community Philosophy as a form of participatory action research (PAR) and extend the scope of what might be possible in terms of promoting social action. Community Philosophy was used as a research methodology, in which young people affected by youth violence were encouraged to generate questions they thought were important in seeking to better understand the phenomenon of violence. Necessarily, this involved their considerable efforts to define violence, prompted by essential philosophical questions about meaning and value. Six topics emerged: 'taking responsibility', 'loyalty', 'respect', 'having a sense of purpose', 'money' and 'public space', each of which was subject to further enquiry. Many reported that, even though they had been subject to a wide range of juvenile justice interventions, this was the first time they had ever been asked what violence was, what role it played, and what value it was ascribed. It's clear, at least from this group's experience, that psycho-social models of intervention dominate, and those using philosophy are extraordinarily rare.

Again, we can see how the 'generative' dimension of Community Philosophy proved important: trusting to the questions young people determine through their own philosophical endeavours. We become aware that the knowledge they possess and create is noticeably absent from the policy and practice discourses relating to the prevention of youth violence. Might this be testament to the failure to value 'knowledge on the ground' and context-appreciative practice? A subsequent session saw young people working together to articulate the themes that had emerged from their enquiries through the use of mapping technologies and model-making. The things they designed and built shed further light on issues of public space, surveillance and violence (and in the myriad forms they had come to realize it existed). Challenged to explain their maps and models to others, their

responses added further texture to what both they and the researchers learned. It seems clear also that these technologies and geographical tools have a particular value in Community Philosophy, as they support reflection into the role of space and place in community life and how the environments we live in are controlled and affect us. When coupled with the use of these tools as a stimulus for philosophical enquiry the value of Community Philosophy as a research tool becomes abundantly clear.

It is easy to say involving communities in research constitutes action, but this needs some qualification, and especially within this (or any other) example of university-led research where the demands to work in a rigorous way are ever-present. In the forward to the book about the project (Seal and Harris, 2016), John Pitts suggests that making and sustaining contact with young people affected by violence is essential to understanding it, as is engaging them in a 'crucial conversation about the kinds of adults they want to become and the kind of world they want to bring into being'. (2016: vi.). Research methods, he suggests, should utilize social practices that aim at helping young people become 'active, reflective, citizens, confident in their abilities and ready to play a part in making the world a better place'. (ibid.). This, of course, constitutes the discourse of participation, and social action.

It is through these means we can better understand the relationship between critical enquiry and action and, as for Paulo Freire, that between reflection and action. Indeed, Freire's work makes clear the need to think in a more nuanced way about how these two concepts are related. In *The Politics of Education* Freire alludes to a 'fundamental problem that has preoccupied philosophy – especially modern philosophy' (1985: 153): the 'relationship between subject and object, consciousness and reality, thought and being, theory and practice'. His contribution is to demand appreciation of the 'dialectical unity'

between these concepts: one cannot be regarded independently of the other, as if a dualism exists. In practice, this means reflection and action must be seen as related, in *praxis*:

> That means, and let us emphasize it, that human beings do not get beyond the concrete situation, the condition in which they find themselves, only by their consciousness or their intentions, however good those intentions may be … it is only as beings in praxis, in accepting our concrete situations as a challenging condition, that we are able to change its meaning by our action (Freire 1985: 154.)

As Freire says, a simple verbal denunciation of social justice is not enough; and the same can be said of any 'mechanicalism' that bypasses a rigorous analysis of reality. The essential point here is that processes that aim at participation and action demand participants' involvement in critically examining their realities *and* the action this informs. No separation of reflection and action can take place if the process is to be authentic, pedagogical, democratic and transformative.

'Working With' as Against 'Doing To'

Participatory research emphasizes 'working with', as against 'doing to' – where the latter might, for example, involve gathering data about participants without their involvement in that process. In emphasizing the social action dimensions of Community Philosophy as a form of participatory action research, there is a need then to imagine research as both a collaborative process (involving researchers and community members) but potentially also a form of autonomous social action that a community might undertake in order to examine its own needs and interests, and potentially act upon them. The involvement of academic or other researchers is not implied. It appears then that the collaborative nature of Community

Philosophy must have a participative character if social action is to be possible and meaningful. We have seen also that participatory practices offer protection from manipulation and a means to empowerment.

Furthermore, Community Philosophy seems to suggest a need to re-value participatory methodologies that have long traditions but are scarce in their application outside the world of international development, as if they are appropriate for others but not ourselves. The criticisms levelled at development work, by the proponents of participation, that it gave (and continues to give) insufficient attention to people's local knowledge (Petty et al. 1995; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kumar 2002) become pertinent to the advancement of philosophy in the community. This valuing of 'knowledge on the ground' contributes not just to the on-going challenge to traditional research paradigms (Chambers 1994; 1997) but, as Seal and Harris suggest, 'a desire to break with positivistic, scientific approaches, and the belief that many phenomena are socially constructed' (2016: 47–8) (see also Cohen et al. 2000). This suggests that participatory action research, participatory learning, and action informed and influenced by participation needs to become mainstream.

Community Philosophy thus can be seen to contribute to the active creation of knowledge in a way that gives it a particular moral stance. In so doing, it can make public unheard voices, and encourage interaction between these and other voices, such that communities are empowered to contribute to an analysis of their own conditions (Seal and Harris 2016). What's imagined can clearly change these voices, and inform and catalyze social action.

Concluding Themes

In recognizing the parallels between participatory research and Community Philosophy, particular themes emerge. We see their similarities extend beyond an orientation toward action: the processes are similar, specifically in terms of having an evolutionary character – in the same sense as the 'generative' dimension referred to above. In this, a commitment to participation goes further than asking questions, in a narrowly consultative fashion: it extends to communities deciding which questions to explore rather than being asked to respond to those determined by external actors.

Similarly, Community Philosophy shares the common principles identifiable in participatory approaches (see Petty et al. 1995). These include ensuring the design of the process and its evaluation is influenced by those who are most likely to be affected; a valuing of negotiation and consensus-building and broader collaborative activity, and a focus on cumulative learning as the stimulus for making change and taking action, including continually developing the capacity of people to initiate action of their own. The aim here is to deliberately privilege local actors and work in a way that is responsive to local conditions, and changes in these conditions. Thus Community Philosophy aims to go beyond a view of participation as merely 'taking part'; rather, it makes a commitment to 'the principle that those who will be substantially affected by decisions made by social and political institutions must be involved in the making of those decisions' (EEC, in Bullock et al. 1977).

There is important nuance in the terms in which social action in informed: the freedoms made possible in working in non-institutional settings need to be grasped. For example, what constitutes 'data' can be re-imagined, as something internally generated and locally evaluated, rather than externally demanded and controlled. Then there is the possibility of working in a context-appreciative way, especially temporally: taking account of what came before, and what might come next, and being able to determine how much time

is invested in the process of enquiry rather than having this dictated by an institutional domain. The contrast with P4C in school is stark, with its emphasis on 'clock-time', where philosophical activity is typically fitted into the 'timetable' and its segmented lessons. This inhibits the possibility of what's learned informing what follows, of taking action on the basis of the conclusions drawn (including, simply, continuing a dialogue). In contrast, non-institutional community settings make possible work that is flexible and responsive, developmental, sustainable, and autonomy-enhancing, albeit there is much work to do in developing the relationship-based foundations for it.

A further contrast is an emphasis on the 'social'; seeing the concept of community in strongly collaborative terms. There is an emphasis then on sharing; and reflection becomes a group rather than individual process; and 'personalisation' and 'differentiation' are resisted in favour of working together in joint endeavour. Kumar's (2002) social 'attitudes' offer an interesting template for what's needed for this to happen:

> Self-critical awareness of one's behaviour, bias and shortcomings: respecting others: not interrupting, not lecturing: but being a good, active listener: not hiding but embracing error: passing initiative and responsibility to others: having confidence in the ability of others and open-ended flexibility (Kumar 2002: 45).

In practice:

> Participants are asked to make links to wider issues, but without resorting to generalized statements about 'we' and 'they'. The method is Socratic, in that it asks the group to build an argument together, question its own assumptions and statements, and expand on ideas. The group tries to logically and rationally build an idea or argument, and then interrogate it. It is the role of the facilitator to keep the group on track (Seal and Harris, 2016: 51).

Likewise, for Seal and Harris: 'These components are integral to the development of a learning environment as a precursor to, and the context in which, open, critical and democratic dialogue are fostered' (2016: 49). Further, they argue, this creates the potential of liberation 'from any external authority that imposes a predetermined process' (ibid.: 50), which is a reality few would dispute exists within institutional contexts.

Care must be taken not to read this as an account of absolute freedom, as if the Community Philosopher is without responsibility. Rather, in non-institutional settings, responsibility is manifested differently. Whereas a teacher, for example, is governed by accountability and performance regimes, working in civil society settings depends less on bureaucracy and more on a negotiated values context. Honesty, integrity, reliability, and trustworthiness matter more. In essence, trust and credibility replace accountability, and informal relationships supplant formal authority; power resides in the community, and deliberate efforts are made to ensure this. Davies' commentary on youth work is pertinent when he asks: 'Is the practice proactively seeking to tip balances of power in young people's favour?' (2005: 11). Broadly then, a principal aim of Community Philosophy is to facilitate action in a manner that affects self, other and community, and perhaps even beyond.

Whilst there's hope here, this is no panacea for wider structural violence and inequality, and prevailing oppressive hegemonies. But it is an attempt to value Community Philosophy-inspired action in all its forms, accepting that structural change can be hard, even impossible, to achieve in the context of the work done. Equating action to social change and only social change can lead to disillusionment. Attempts then to change anything can wither on the vine, unless, that is, a more nuanced view of action – as has been suggested in terms of scale – is adopted. Hickey and Mohan's (2004) reconceptualization of participation, empowerment and development, as we have seen,

helps greatly: seeing power as stratified and differentiated, rather than in binary terms, recognizes that many people have a limited capacity for action but this is not a reason not to encourage it at a local level.

To return to the Touch Project as an exemplar, we can recognize the value of using Community Philosophy as not just a research methodology, but as one capable of maximizing 'the transformative and pedagogic potential of the research process' (Seal and Harris, 2016: 51); that Community Philosophy is a form of community learning, which uses philosophical enquiry as:

> the basis for a deep conceptual analysis and exploration of the issues affecting participants … [in which] participants determine the questions to be examined and are encouraged to engage with each other in a critical and collaborative manner. The method lends itself to social action, and is thus allied to the interests of participatory researchers (ibid.).

This fits well with previous reflections from an earlier time in Community Philosophy's development:

> Community Philosophy as an intervention is capable of stimulating critical reflection on community issues and problems. An aim is to use the understanding that emerges – the learning – to inform action and seek resolution to these problems: hence the methodology's 'practical' orientation and its aspiration to act as a 'transformational practice' (Tiffany, 2010: 3).

It becomes clear then that the 'process' of Community Philosophy takes on an extraordinary significance.

A Last Word: Community Philosophy and Social Action – From Process to a New Kind of Politics

Together these ideas inform an understanding of Community Philosophy as a resolutely political project, albeit one, unusually perhaps, intent on advancing a commitment to particular processes rather than particular outcomes. Importantly, these processes are found to facilitate rather than dictate social action, and action that is freely chosen by communities, as distinct from the prescribed outcomes they are so often directed towards by policy and practice.

There are important process-oriented parallels to be found in the work of recent commentators, especially George Monbiot who, in *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*, advances a view that would not be out of place in Community Philosophy: 'To ask how participatory culture can revive political life is, in one respect, to miss the point: it *is* political life' (2017: 83). Monbiot's entire premise rests on a contestation of the view that humans are an inherently competitive species, a view of the world that validates a range of cultural and political pressures seemingly intent on individuating all facets of human existence. He writes:

> We are extraordinary creatures, whose capacity for altruism and reciprocity is unmatched in the animal kingdom. But these remarkable traits have been suppressed by an ideology of extreme individualism and competition. With the help of this ideology, and the story used to project it, alienation and loneliness have become the defining conditions of our time. Far from apprehending them as threats to our well-being, we have been induced to see them as aspirations (2017: 182–183).

So, we return again to the need to elevate the status of the social, and, in practice, methodologies that support collaborative thinking and social action – action undertaken

with others. For Monbiot this constitutes a 'politics of belonging', in which 'community projects proliferate into a vibrant, participatory culture that transforms the character of our neighbourhoods.' (ibid.). Transformation, of course, implies action; and, in the context of community, this implies social action. Furthermore, 'A flourishing community stimulates our innate urge to cooperate. It helps immunize us against extremism and demagoguery, and it turns democracy into a daily habit. Community is the place from which new politics begins to grow' (ibid.: 184). Likewise, cooperation, like collaboration, implies action. And, again, this is implicitly *social* action. Perhaps Community Philosophy is at least one of the means by which this might occur.

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[i] The Adult Learning Project, then based in Gorgy-Dalry in Edinburgh, Scotland, was one of the earliest attempts to put the ideas of Paul Freire into practice in a European context. See: Tiffany, G. (1994) *Freire for Young Adults*, National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) special edition on Young Adults Learning.

[ii] From the French *currere*.

[iii] A 'Last Words' activity is typically used as the culmination of the '12-step model'. In this, participants are encouraged to give a final thought about, say, their experience of the process; something they found interesting; what they have learned; what they think now; or a thought they will ponder on, in the future.

[iv] The *Joseph Rowntree Foundation i*s an independent organisation working to inspire social change through research, policy and practice. See: https://www.jrf.org.uk/

[v] UK Government's Respect and Dispersal Powers. Home Office. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100408122626/http://www.asb.homeoffice.gov.uk/uploadedFiles/Members_site/Documents_and_images/Enforcement_tools_and_powers/RespectAndDispersal_Guidance_0018.pdf.

[vi] The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-makers in the UK. It aims to improve the quality of life for people and communities throughout the UK both now and in the future by funding the charitable work of organisations that are building an inclusive, creative and sustainable society: https://www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk/

[vii] SAPERE: https://www.sapere.org.uk/

[viii] Living Adult Education being a notable exception, see Kirkwood and Kirkwood (1990).