

# Empathic Pedagogy: Community of Inquiry and the Development of Empathy

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Many Philosophy for Children advocates argue that the practice of communal philosophical dialogue develops students' judgment making skills and facilitates the growth of reasonable subjects (Pritchard, 1996; Lipman & Sharp 1978; Lipman, 1991; Sprod, 2001, Sharp and Splitter, 1995). While these are appropriate avenues for exploring the moral education potential of the program, the literature can be further enriched by examining how Community of Inquiry supports the development of empathy.

Previously I argued that any empathic pedagogy must provide students with a means of engaging across the boundaries of the subject in an intersubjective gestalt—i.e. it must allow for peer mediated inquiry-based interactions that support the sharing of affective states (Schertz, 2004). Given this conceptualization of empathic pedagogy, in this piece I will claim that Community of Inquiry is a crucial and paradigmatic means for promoting the further development of empathy. In order to reinforce the developmental soundness of the methodology, I will discuss it in light of Martin Hoffman's (2000) empathic modes, which are distinct processes that promote the growth of what Hoffman calls the "mature empathizer" (pg. 63). Community of Inquiry enables students to conjointly explore philosophical concepts, personal anecdotes, and stories through a discursive structure that allows for and encourages the facilitation of these empathic modes through a dynamic system of interlocking subjectivities. The methodology enables students to direct their chosen discourse and promotes an intersubjective gestalt, allowing children to engage each other in affective communication in a discursive context that is also cognitive and metacognitive.

Before I go on to examine Community of Inquiry in light of Hoffman's theory, I want to briefly touch upon my reconceptualization of the phenomenon of empathy and then discuss the important role which dialogue plays in the development of the empathic subject. Previously I (Schertz, 2004) defined empathy as the mediation of emotional information between two body-consciousnesses that involves systemic communicative processes operating between subjects which are, by definition and structure, relational. In other words, empathy can be seen as a form of communication by which human beings interact in an intersubjective gestalt. An empathic episode can involve a variety of processes, from mimicry to role taking, depending on the interpersonal context and the developmental capabilities of the subjects. Research regarding the development of empathy indicates that the tenor of formative communicative experiences can have profound effects on a child's nascent empathic abilities (Damon, 1998; Hoffman, 2000; Verducci, 1999). Effective development is largely dependent upon modeling by the parent, dialogically-based inductive interactions, and non-authoritarian and/or non-abusive adult behaviors. Similarly, the disciplinary practices used within the classroom, the child's access to peer-mediated relations, and the chosen pedagogical style of the teacher can later impact the child's ability to engage in systemic communicative processes (Schertz, 2004).

In order to provide access to the intersubjective experience, Verducci (1999) discusses the importance of giving "programmatically attention" to role-taking activities, having students "practice imagining/perceiving another's perspective" and providing students with "exposure to emotionally laden stimuli....These practices correlate with increases in empathy" (pg. 185). In terms of specific curricular activities and pedagogical techniques, "cooperative learning and cross-age and peer tutoring correlate with increases in empathy" (pg. 185). Verducci alleges that "attention to building communities is also important when considering cultivating empathy....This encompasses problem-solving through class meetings and expanding student participation in decision making" (pp. 186-187). Her adherence to engaged perspective taking, democratic community building, and cooperative

learning all speak to the critical role that pedagogy plays in educating for empathy. Although Verducci does not address peer-mediated dialogue in depth, it was previously emphasized by Damon (1988) and considered to be foundationally important by Piaget (1965) for autonomous moral development.

Dialogue provides the pedagogical vehicle by which intersubjective empathic development reaches its full potential. Consider the following statement by Kennedy (1999):

Dialogue emerges in the ‘between’ among persons, a space of play, difference, liminality, and transcendence, in which boundaries are, if not renounced, then put at risk....In dialogue we enter into the experience of lived difference—we no longer operate from the position of the boundaried, thematizing subject. In dialogue there is a decentering of the transcendental ego.  
(pg. 340)

Dialogical pedagogy provides the means by which selves can grow through connecting with and understanding other selves. It is a process that allows students to engage in relation while simultaneously enabling them to assimilate other subjectivities. Dialogical pedagogy is a place of acceptance, where subjects reasonably approach each other’s positions. It is a place of confirmation, where two friends resolve a deliberation. It is also a place of “lived difference” where the “thematized subject” is challenged through intersubjective mediation. Within the dialogical encounter our bodies kinesthetically, vocally and aurally meet, which establishes an affective exchange while simultaneously providing a place for increased cognition and metacognition.

Kennedy (1999) argues that the communal pursuit of knowledge actualized within Community of Inquiry promotes a gestalt phenomenon that allows participating subjectivities to collectively mediate, connect, challenge and reconstruct themselves. “Dialogue is not the taking of positions, but a mutual positioning within a space of interrogation which is characterized as self-othering, or experiencing self as other” (pg. 340). It is Kennedy who supplies the phenomenological argument for the transformation of the subject through engagement in this “space of interrogation.” Using Winnicott’s (1971) term, he posits that Community of Inquiry is a “transitional space,” where subjectivities are both constructed and deconstructed through the process of shared inquiry (pg. 41).

Although the intersubjective traits of Community of Inquiry have been briefly touched upon in some articles where it is argued that the pedagogy is “fugal” (Lipman, 1995) and forms a dialogical “space where we encounter the transcendent in the continual coming-to-presence of the other” (Kennedy, 1999 pg. 340), Community of Inquiry has not been sufficiently explored as a pedagogy that supports the development of empathy. I will now seek to establish Community of Inquiry as an empathic pedagogy by examining it in light of Martin Hoffman’s (2000) work on the development of empathy. Briefly put, Community of Inquiry provides a peer-mediated educational encounter that fosters the development of empathy through polyphonic discourse, inquiry-based inductions and the sharing of affective states. When combined with ethical inquiry, for example, it can become a powerful means of providing moral education because ethical issues can be discussed within a social milieu that promotes empathy and the practice of prosocial behavior. However, it must be emphasized that the pedagogy itself is the fundamental relational event that must underlie the moral education encounter.

### **Hoffman’s Modes**

In his research on the development of empathy, Martin Hoffman (2000) discusses a wide range of processes that are fundamentally empathic. Rather than defining empathy in terms of one specific process, he understands there to be a choice of processes, depending on the situation, or on the empathic development of the person(s) involved. The first of his three empathic processes or modes—mimicry, classical conditioning and direct association—are preverbal and automatic, and require little cognitive processing. The latter modes—language mediated association and role taking—rely on more advanced cognitive abilities. Community of Inquiry complements Hoffman’s empathic modes both through its practice of peer-mediated dialogue and its adherence to the principles of inquiry. An intersubjective space is created which enables participants to share affective states using both the automatic modes and those that require more advanced cognitive processing. Although I will briefly describe all the modes in turn and examine them through the lens of Community of Inquiry, I will

concentrate on the program's use of inductions, for herein lies the true strength of the pedagogy to foster the development of the mature empathizer.

Hoffman (2000) characterizes mimicry as a primary, "hardwired" ability that facilitates congruent affective responses and supports the more advanced empathic modes. It involves involuntary imitation of an emotional display followed by a corresponding feeling in the observer. Hoffman cites several studies which indicate that infants and adults can automatically imitate facial expressions and then exhibit corresponding feeling states (Hoffman, 2000). He concludes that mimicry occurs unconsciously from early infancy and continues throughout our lives. One could argue that mimicry is a primary means of communication, whereby we kinesthetically mirror the posture, emotional expression, and speech patterns of others and then experience an accompanying feeling state. The phenomenon of mimicry supports my reconceptualization of empathy in terms of intersubjectivity because feeling states are shared through bodily movements and emotional displays. When a young child, for example, is receiving and displaying emotional expressions, and simultaneously experiencing the corresponding feeling states, his affective development is being strengthened. The further development of empathy depends on this emotional transference.

In regards to mimicry, Community of Inquiry affords the participant multifarious sensory communication with a variety of other subjects. The circular positioning of inward-facing bodies allows for optimal facial contact, which promotes the rapid transfer of feeling states and behavioral displays. In particular, the aural and visual sensory systems are stimulated through the dialogical process. From a kinesthetic standpoint, Community of Inquiry also allows for bodily movements to be rapidly mirrored among its participants (Kennedy, 1999). Mimicry also assists in promoting the acquisition of communal dispositions. Procedures and behaviors that enable Community of Inquiry to function are accommodated through this empathic mode.

Hoffman's next mode, classical conditioning, involves the communal experience of an intense emotion, coupled with the realization that others are experiencing it as well (Hoffman, 2000). For example, if we are in a crowded marketplace when a bomb is detonated, the fear that is collectively experienced causes us to act in concert—to flee, seek comfort in each other's arms, etc. Classical conditioning is described as a shared emotional event, a bonding experience that facilitates a rapid transfer of feeling states. It highlights the existence of an emotional field within which we can collectively participate.

Community of Inquiry supplies an ideal environment for classical conditioning to occur. For example, the topic of dialogue, which may comprise an emotionally powerful component, such as a traumatic narrative or anecdote, can facilitate classical conditioning. In addition, the temperaments and behaviors of subjects within Community of Inquiry can also trigger this mode. The joy that arises from the telling of a good joke, for example, can be collectively shared within this intersubjective gestalt. The child-centered dialogical experience afforded by the pedagogy enables the rapid flow of emotional states that are simultaneously acknowledged by all the members of the group.

Direct association, Hoffman's next mode, occurs when we observe an emotional display that reminds us of a past experience. It differs from classical conditioning in that it is not based on sharing the experience of an emotional event with others. Rather, it relies on the ability to pick up situational cues and react to them without actually experiencing the stimulus ourselves. Instead, we recall similar situations in our own past and react to those memories. In terms of intersubjectivity, direct association enables us to engage in a relational field with others because of our common experience. In Community of Inquiry, one subject's emotional display may trigger memories for other participants. One student's tears, for example, may cause other members to revisit sorrowful memories. The emotional vivacity of the storytelling experience readily supports the existence of direct association within Communities of Inquiry.

The fifth mode, language mediated association, is closely related to the previous mode, but in this situation, the emotion need not be directly observed. The subject merely has to be told about an incident in order to experience a congruent affective response. Language mediated association is more cognitively advanced than the previous modes because it requires that the observer respond to an anecdote rather than directly to an affective phenomena. The retelling of an emotionally rich experience or a powerfully written passage in a novel can serve as a stimulus for this form of empathic response. This mode requires that we respond to language itself, and thus implies that we are cognitively advanced enough to react to words rather than emotional displays or shared emotional experiences. As is the case in direct association, we are in this case intersubjectively connecting

with another's experience. This connection relies on our ability to be interpersonally receptive to the retelling of emotional events, whether through identifying with a personal anecdote or the emotionally-laden experiences of a character in a novel.

Language mediated association probably occurs more readily in Communities of Inquiry than direct association. Although emotional displays may trigger memories in participating students, the profusion of peer-mediated dialogue is more likely to promote language-mediated association through the disclosure of feelings, the telling of anecdotes, and the sharing of ideas. The discussions that take place within Community of Inquiry can serve as a means for students to remember events from their own lives and emotionally relive those events. One child's story, for example, may help me recall my own, and therefore may help me connect with an emotional state or an event buried within my subconscious. In addition, the stimulus utilized in the philosophical discussion, whether it be from a philosophical novel or from some other narrative, may in itself promote language-mediated association. One character's inquisitiveness, another's determination, and another's feeling of objectification may remind students of experiencing similar emotions in their own lives.

Hoffman claims that role taking is our most advanced empathic ability. Unlike many of the previous modes, it depends on deliberate effort and practice (Hoffman, 2000; Ickes, 1997). Hoffman discusses two different types of role taking. Self-focused role taking is identical to Adam Smith's version of the phenomenon, wherein we analogously imagine ourselves in another's situation. When we are engaged in other-focused role taking, we are concentrating on what the other must be experiencing. Both versions further reinforce the problems of discrete subjectivity because, according to Hoffman (2000), role taking necessarily relies on the cognitive abilities of an inherently separate self. In addition, role taking does not necessitate either a direct transfer of emotion or interpersonal interaction. Instead, it depends on an individual's imaginative ability and willingness to utilize that ability.

George Herbert Mead's claim, that we are able to assume the role of the other because we have assimilated his or her perspective through mimetic experience and social conditioning, challenges the assumption that role taking requires "inherent separation." According to Rosenthal and Bourgeois, Mead's version of role taking "is not grasped by analogy with one's own interiority but rather other selves exist in their corporeal conduct and are grasped by direct access to perception" (Rosenthal & Bourgeois, 1992 pg. 90). Role taking is therefore not based on Smith's version of the phenomena, which adheres to the projective imagination of a discrete subject. Instead, "intercorporeality underlies the very ability to take roles, for taking the role of the other presupposes "being with" the other (pg. 88). Perhaps engaging in Hoffman's other-focused role taking is actually synonymous with what Mead (1934) calls the "generalized other," the "organized community or social group which gives to the individual the unity of the self" (pg. 91). For example, we are able to empathize with the victim because of our past relations with victims and our own experience of victimization. If this is the case, then Mead is correct in claiming that role taking is dependent on interpersonal interaction.

One could challenge my assertion that Community of Inquiry is an ideal empathic pedagogy by claiming that any dialogically based pedagogical system can facilitate the process of empathy. While a variety of programs may operationalize Hoffman's modes—provided that peer-mediated discourse is practiced in these alternative settings—Community of Inquiry, unlike many other initiatives, provides multidimensional access to the process of role taking. This particular empathic pedagogy both supplies an intersubjective gestalt that enables students to assimilate multiple subjectivities and, through the process of inquiry, engenders dispositions that encourage the further taking of roles.

This peer-mediated environment thrives on intersubjective communication because the opinions, ideas and contributions of participants shape the evolution of the dialogue. As opposed to many character education programs—and this was Dewey's point as well—peer-mediation frees students from being forced to accept adult-derived preconceptions of moral truth. The discourse is not limited by one perspective, the adult authority. In addition to allowing students access to the perspectives of others, engaging in dialogue gives them practice in negotiating with these various perspectives or roles. Therefore, role taking is both a content driven and process oriented enterprise where members of the community are both learning to tolerate and value other subjectivities and practicing how to engage with other subjects who may hold radically different opinions.

In addition to providing participants with access to various subjects, the process of philosophical inquiry engenders a willingness to explore multiple subjectivities, belief systems and/or moral truths. By encouraging

students to be inquiring subjects, the pedagogue hopes that in the future, her students will be more willing to explore ethical matters instead of merely deferring decisions to set moral guidelines or an external authority.

Moreover, Community of Inquiry helps in the further advancement of role taking by providing the means for students to internalize the process which Hoffman (2000) labels “induction, in which the parents highlight the other’s perspective...” (pg. 143). Inductions are a powerful means of encouraging the growth of the mature empathizer because they focus on emotions, encourage compassionate, prosocial interaction, and enable children to further internalize the role taking process. Within Community of Inquiry, inductions fall under the realm of ethical inquiry because they encourage children to focus on other subjectivities. Members of the community can initiate inductions for two general purposes.

Firstly, the pedagogue can fulfill the role of Socrates by problematizing the opinions or positions of particular students. Although this is not the primary role of the teacher in Community of Inquiry, the pedagogue should demonstrate the practice of inquiry by offering counterexamples and reaffirming alternative positions to encourage active engagement across the boundaries of the subject. Although I have been emphasizing the importance of peer-mediated intersubjective gestalts, which were highlighted by Dewey to ensure that adult authority does not limit or control the dialogical experience, the pedagogue in the Philosophy for Children classroom, in addition to fulfilling a Socratic function, is seeking to promote student led dialogue. Moreover, teacher-prompted, inquiry-based inductions can serve to deconstruct rigid subjectivities while simultaneously encouraging the continuation of plasticity and the growth of a reflective mind.

Students may also initiate inductions in Community of Inquiry. An individual student or group of “engaged” subjects can challenge another student’s position or opinion by mirroring the Socratic method demonstrated by the pedagogue. Given the importance of peer interaction in school environments, inductions initiated by one’s peers may be more effective than those posed by the teacher.

In addition to using inductions for the purpose of challenging opinions and positions, teachers and students within Community of Inquiry can employ them to confront behaviors that are potentially harmful to individual members of the community and the group at large. Inductions may be an especially effective tool for addressing a member(s) who insists on badgering and/or attacking others, because inductions help to focus the offender’s attention on the emotional status of the victim and help to clearly indicate guilt (Hoffman, 2000). Moreover, inductions may help all members of Community of Inquiry, not just the offender, realize which behaviors can be harmful to other subjects.

Ultimately, the use of inductions both within the home and the school are indicative of a moral education based on human rights. However, one should not assume that this technique falls squarely under the auspices of a liberal position that adheres to discrete subjectivity. Although one could argue that inductions encourage the child to imagine the perspective of a separate other, inductions are initiated via an intersubjective process. Moral education must not rely on abstraction, but on an intersubjective meeting that allows for the social construction of subjects through multifarious inquiry for the purposes of creating and sustaining an empathic generalized other.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the practice of communal philosophical inquiry does more for the development of empathy than provide inductions. Philosophical inquiry is an exploratory venture that enables students to access the various subjectivities within the classroom, a plethora of perennial philosophical positions, and a polyphony of characters within the selected narratives. The practice of inquiry is itself an empathic venture, in that the questing philosopher seeks to continually reconstruct herself through engagement, irrespective of whether the complimentary subject is human, text or world.

The empathic traits of communal philosophical inquiry lend support to my argument that Community of Inquiry is an ideal place for the growth of the relational subject. Mead’s (1934) conception of the generalized other, which is constructed in accordance with “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self,” when envisioned within the context of Community of Inquiry, lends credence to my assertion that this pedagogy supports the development of empathy (pg. 154). The polyphonic gestalt it actualizes supports the construction of relational subjects because this intersubjective field provides students with intimate, inquiry-induced, peer interaction.

It is important to acknowledge that Community of Inquiry does not support empathic pedagogy. When Community of Inquiry exists, it **is** empathic pedagogy. It is, using Mead’s (1934) term, a “conversation of

gestures” or (pg. 14), using Buber’s (1965) concept, “genuine dialogue” (pg.19). Peer-mediated philosophical inquiry is a paradigmatic instance of an empathic field that facilitates the deconstruction and reconstruction of subjectivity. It is a place of play, of collective transition, and ultimately, a nurturing environment for interwoven body-consciousnesses.

Community of Inquiry, I will maintain, must form the relational basis for interaction throughout the educational experience if we wish for our educational system as a whole to supplement the fostering of empathic proclivities. The pedagogy could be used in civics or ethics courses within the existing school structure for the purpose of supplying students with a character-building curricular experience. However, I am skeptical that this pedagogical exception will have a profound impact on the development of empathy for large numbers of students if the remaining pedagogical systems and schooling structures do not support intersubjectivity. As Mead (1908) has said, “[I]t is of the first importance to recognize that it is only as the school becomes organized as a social whole, and as the child recognizes his conduct as a reflection or formulation of that society, will it be possible to have any moral training in our schools” (pg. 327). Although some exposure to empathic pedagogy may be a positive and enriching experience for many students, the generalized other, regardless of a pedagogue’s best efforts, will form as the result of multifarious social systems, many of which are not conducive to the development of empathy. When one examines our current educational system in light of Foucault and looks at how our society simultaneously idealizes communitarian authoritarianism, the “autonomous” individual and a culture of consumption, then envisioning the effectiveness of Community of Inquiry as an “extra” becomes a moot point.

Empathic pedagogy can supplement the development of empathy to a much greater degree if it is readily embraced by school culture. This second option would require administrators, teachers and students to radically alter their own conception of the school—to envision a whole school model—with Community of Inquiry at its core. This would necessarily require the abandonment of larger, impersonal facilities in favor of smaller nurturing environments that allowed for intersubjective exchange both within the structure of the school as a whole and within individual classrooms. Relationships that were previously defined according to hierarchical management, pervasive control and consistent quantitative assessment would have to be restructured to support a pedagogical system which is aligned with the realities and needs of child and adolescent development. It is to this end that we as educators must strive. Otherwise, we run the risk of being poor stewards of children and society.

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