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the story circle as a practice of democratic, critical inquiry

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abstract

The authors of this essay have been committed practitioners and teachers of Philosophy for Children in a variety of educational settings, from pre-schools through university doctoral programs and in adult community and religious education programs. The promotion of critical thinking has always been a primary goal of this movement. But communal practices of critical thinking need to include other kinds of democratic conversation that prompt us to see others as full-fledged persons and to be curious about how our being in community with them makes growth and self-correction possible. As we continue to experiment and innovate in new contexts we see ourselves continuing the inquiry around expanding the inclusivity of conversations about basic human concerns. In this essay we describe an inclusive strategy called the story circle, that was first developed as a method of popular education in Denmark and was then adapted as a tool of social change among poor and dis-empowered American citizens in Appalachia. Story circles were later utilized in a philosophical living-learning community and most recently coupled with Lipman and Sharp's dialogue method of the community of philosophical inquiry (CPI). The authors of this paper have combined story circles with the community of philosophical inquiry in a variety of contexts. In each iteration, telling one's own story and listening carefully to the stories of others can be equally revelatory actions.

keywords: philosophy for children; community of philosophical inquiry; story circle; democracy.

el círculo historias como práctica de investigación democrática y crítica

resumen

Los autores de este ensayo han sido comprometidos practicantes y maestros de Filosofía para Niños en una variedad de ambientes educativos, desde preescolares hasta programas de

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doctorado universitario y de educación comunitaria y religiosa para adultos. La promoción del pensamiento crítico siempre ha sido un objetivo primordial de este movimiento. Pero las prácticas comunales de pensamiento crítico necesitan incluir otros tipos de conversación democrática que nos inciten a ver a las demás como personas de pleno derecho y a tener curiosidad sobre cómo nuestro estar en comunidad con ellos hace posible el crecimiento y la auto-corrección. A medida que continuamos experimentando e innovando en nuevos contextos nos vemos continuando la investigación sobre la expansión de la inclusividad de las conversaciones sobre las preocupaciones humanas básicas. En este ensayo describimos una estrategia inclusiva llamada círculo de historias, que se desarrolló primero como un método de educación popular en Dinamarca y luego se adaptó como una herramienta de cambio social entre los ciudadanos norteamericanos pobres y desempoderados en los Apalaches. Los círculos de historias se utilizaron más tarde en una comunidad de aprendizaje filosófico vivencial y, más recientemente, se combinó con el método de diálogo de Lipman y Sharp de la comunidad de investigación filosófica. Los autores de este artículo han combinado los círculos de historias con la comunidad de investigación filosófica en una diversidad de contextos. En cada iteración, contar la propia historia y escuchar atentamente las historias de los demás pueden ser acciones igualmente reveladoras.

palabras clave: filosofía para niñxs; comunidad de investigación filosófica; círculo de historias; democracia.

o círculo de histórias como uma prática de investigação democrática e crítica

resumo

Os autores deste ensaio têm sido praticantes e professores comprometidos de Filosofia para Crianças em uma variedade de ambientes educacionais, desde pré-escolas até programas de doutorado universitário e de educação religiosa e comunitária para adultos. A promoção do pensamento crítico sempre foi um objetivo primordial deste movimento. Mas as práticas comuns de pensamento crítico precisam incluir outros tipos de conversação democrática que nos induzam a ver os outros como pessoas plenamente desenvolvidas e a ter curiosidade sobre como o fato de estarmos em comunidade com elas torna o crescimento e a autocorreção possíveis. À medida que continuamos a experimentar e inovar em novos contextos, nos vemos continuando a investigação em torno da expansão da inclusão das conversas sobre as preocupações humanas básicas. Neste ensaio, descrevemos uma estratégia inclusiva chamada de círculo de histórias, que foi desenvolvida pela primeira vez como um método de educação popular na Dinamarca e depois adaptada como uma ferramenta de mudança social entre cidadãos norteamericanos pobres e sem poder nos Apalaches. Os círculos de histórias foram posteriormente utilizados em uma comunidade de aprendizagem filosófica vivencial e, mais recentemente, combinados com o método de diálogo de Lipman e Sharp da comunidade de investigação filosófica (CPI). Os autores deste artigo combinaram círculos de histórias com a comunidade de investigação filosófica em diversos contextos. Em cada iteração, contar a própria história e ouvir atentamente as histórias de outras pessoas podem ser ações igualmente reveladoras.

palavras-chave: filosofia para crianças; comunidade de investigação filosófica; círculo de histórias; democracia.



the story circle as a practice of democratic, critical inquiry

introduction (peter shea and maughn rollins gregory)

When Matthew Lipman was writing his first philosophical novel for children in the late 1960s he joined a social inquiry tradition that extended at least back to Socrates, whose dialogues in the marketplace of Athens were open to whomever happened by. The question about how widely conversations about not-immediately-practical matters such as justice, knowledge and human values could be shared among non-elite participants was urgent in Athens, which had admitted new people to full citizenship and invited them to shape policy in ways unprecedented at that time, in that part of the world. The question is just as urgent for contemporary democracies, in which governmental forms allow an unprecedented range of people to help shape the institutions within which they conduct their lives. It is an open question in every era whether the basic dialogues that ground this work can become open and shared enough to make democracy viable. Lipman (2003) opened these dialogues to children, and the program of Philosophy for Children he developed with his collaborator Ann Margaret Sharp (see Gregory and Laverty, 2018) and their colleague Gareth Matthews (1980, 1984; Gregory and Laverty, 2022) is in many ways a continuation of the legacy of John Dewey: it makes obvious that a substantial expansion of basic conversation is possible.

The authors of this essay have been committed practitioners and teachers of Philosophy for Children in a variety of educational settings, from pre-schools through university doctoral programs and in adult community and religious education programs. As we continue to experiment and innovate in new contexts we see ourselves continuing the inquiry into how inclusive conversations about basic human concerns can become. We recognize that many people have been left out of these conversations, even in the most inclusive settings, because of prejudice, different relations to language, biases in the choice of topics, and the strictures of even liberal educational agendas. At the same time, we recognize many experiments in inclusion

that have run parallel to the democratic impetus of Philosophy for Children. In this essay we describe an inclusive strategy called the story circle, that was developed as a method of popular education in Denmark, then adapted by Myles Horton as a tool of social change among poor and dis-empowered American citizens in Appalachia. It was later utilized by John Wallace in a philosophical living-learning community, and most recently coupled with Lipman and Sharp's dialogue method of the community of philosophical inquiry.

The promotion of critical thinking has always been an important goal of Philosophy for Children (Lipman 1985, 1992, 1997). Robert Ennis defines critical thinking as *"reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do"* (2015:32, emphasis in original) and the dispositions he identifies as promoting this goal are those that teachers should cultivate. Some of these dispositions can be taught directly; one can prompt students to give reasons, to seek credible sources. But other dispositions define an attitude of modesty and curiosity more than specific moves or actions: be well informed, take account of the total situation, be alert for alternatives, be open-minded. Lipman points in this direction, defining critical thinking as *"skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it (1) relies on criteria, (2) is self-correcting, and (3) is sensitive to context"* (1988:39, emphasis in original). Lipman argues that self-correction is a result of internalizing the mutual correction that occurs in a community of philosophical inquiry. Following this lead, Barbara Thayer-Bacon highlights the pragmatist roots of Lipman's work and advocates a Deweyan model of critical thinking that:

highlights the transactions between individuals and others [...]. With his description of social transaction in democratic community terms, Dewey also removes the exclusive image of reflective thinkers as well-to-do, able-bodied, males. Dewey's democratic community image is suggestive of political rallies, community picnics, barn raisers, and quilting bees (2000:145).

However, people often assume that they are informed, alert, open, and circumspect, and they do not always respond well when told they are deficient in these respects, even by peers within a community of inquiry. Alternatively, stories told



around a circle probe participants' senses of their own 'completeness' in a natural and unthreatening way. In such a circle we find that our ideas of home or friendship or courage are ones among many, that we recognize these realities in experiences very far from our own. At the same time, we are led to revise our first judgments about the other participants; they are almost always more thoughtful and complex than we had imagined. If we take part in story circles frequently, we begin to expect that our initial ideas will be exceeded and extended by what we hear. We develop a natural openness to new ideas and an ability to entertain alternative points of view. This move toward context sensitivity and self-correction is one major contribution that story circles can make to promoting critical thinking.

Ennis's definition of critical thinking focuses on decisions about beliefs and actions. These are important, but there are other decisions we make that are equally fundamental: decisions about what kind of person we want to be, what style of action we will adopt in life, what attitudes we will try to embody. These may be captured in Lipman's broader notion of critical thinking as facilitating good judgment. The child who says, "I want to be like my uncle" or "I don't want to turn out like my brother," is making a very fundamental judgment and one that should be within the scope of "skillful, responsible thinking," though it is not easily guided in classroom settings. Perhaps the best thing teachers can do to promote critical thinking around such decisions is to produce a transparent community – a community in which people can see what kinds of people are around them. In this regard, even communal philosophical dialogue gives students only a small window into one another's lives. Story circles expand what students can show each other about their lives and their struggles, thus extending critical thinking into a new and fundamental domain of human reason.

In addition to critical thinking, fostering children's political awareness and agency has been an important, if underdeveloped part of the Philosophy for Children project from the beginning. Much has been written about the political dimension of the "community of philosophical inquiry" that Lipman and Sharp devised as a protocol

for classroom philosophy discussions (see Gregory, 2004; Lipman, 1998; Sharp, 1997), especially in relation to the political theory of John Dewey (with whom Lipman visited and corresponded), who saw both democracy and education as methods of intelligent coping with the problems and opportunities of current experience that improve the qualities of future experience:

For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man [*sic*] to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication? ... Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. (Dewey, 1939/1976:227, 229)

Some scholars recommend Philosophy for Children as a practice of social justice pedagogy, in which children and adults learn to investigate, criticize and disrupt the social injustices that typify families, schools, workplaces and public spaces (see Gregory, 2021; Kizel, 2016a, 2016b; Sharp, 2009). In this regard, some (Fletcher, 2016; Lipman, 2011; Weber, 2008) relate the community of philosophical inquiry to Jürgen Habermas' notion of the ideal speech community. Others relate it to Paulo Freire's proposals for liberatory education (see Contreras and Fuenmayor, 2007; Costello and Morehouse, 2012). In fact, Lipman and Sharp met with Freire in 1988 to compare their educational agendas (see de la Garza, 2020; Lipman, 2008: 148), a year after Freire spent a week with Horton for the same purpose (see Horton, et al., 1990). However, other scholars find Philosophy for Children ineffectual for fostering children's political agency because of: a) the limited role of students and teachers in co-constructing the curriculum; b) its understanding of critical thinking as aimed at reasonableness rather than justice (see Fuston, 2017); and c) because it fails to draw direct attention to issues of race-, class- and gender-based oppression (see Chetty, 2018; Kohan, 2018). We believe that combining the practices of story circle and philosophical inquiry addresses some of these concerns.



Philosophy for Children took the risk of inviting children into democratic and philosophic territory: critical argument, conceptual analysis and interpersonal dialogue around common but central issues. In doing so, it provided a child-sized door into a recognizably adult space. However, not all children (or all people) take to this activity with equal enthusiasm. Simply telling stories is more natural for many people. We are trying to learn how this activity, in a disciplined and orderly context, can contribute to critical reflection on experience, and to the formation of a community able to cooperate and share insight over the long-term. We find there are compelling reasons for using storytelling as a philosophical practice, not the least of which is that storytelling has long been used within social justice movements to honor and give voice to the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Nevertheless, the accounts we present are preliminary. We do not claim that story circles are the solution to every problem. Rather, we are interested in examining the relationships among a variety of inclusive strategies, in order to figure out what they are good for and how they can be combined as part of a teacher's flexible response-set.

a brief history of the story circle (maughn rollins gregory)

Myles Horton began community organizing in the late 1920s as a college student working summers for the Presbyterian Church to organize Sunday schools and Bible study vacations for the residents of Ozone, Tennessee, a geographically isolated and economically depressed town in the Cumberland mountains. Horton organized meetings for parents and other community members, ostensibly to discuss their children's Bible study, but then shifted the conversation to community issues such as sanitation, education, and labor disputes. It was in these meetings that Horton first realized that these under-educated, working-class people could find their own solutions to the challenges they faced by reflecting on their experiences and telling each other their stories. He saw that any solutions he might try to impose would not only be ill-informed but would rob them of the opportunity to trust their own intelligence, to develop their own expertise and leadership skills, and to forge a stronger community

by learning from and relying on each other to define and solve their own problems (see Horton, 1998:21-3; Horton et al., 1990:48-9; Preskill, 2021:35-43). This early experience shaped Horton's understanding of the nature of thinking as a communal activity of shared problem solving. Some sixty years later, in a dialogue with Paolo Freire, Horton remarked,

I think if I had to put a finger on what I consider a good education, a good *radical* education, it wouldn't be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first.[...] And then next is respect for people's abilities to learn and to act and to shape their own lives. You have to have confidence that people can do that.[...] The third thing [...] is that you value their experiences. You can't say you respect people and not respect their experiences (Horton et al., 1990:177-8).

In 1929 Horton attended the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he studied under the progressive Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and became familiar with the social gospel movement of applying Protestant Christian ethics to social issues including child labor, education, poverty, racism, and war. Of his time at the Seminary, Horton recalled: "We were Depression-era products. We were in that kind of radical period in American history where people were beginning to question the system, where people were beginning to think. We'd been stimulated by the explosive sort of thinking of Niebuhr and people like him, who kind of blew your mind. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was there at Union as a student when I was" (Horton et al., 1990:42).

Niebuhr introduced Horton to John Dewey, whose writings on reflective thinking, social democracy, and education as the analysis and improvement of experience became formative for Horton's own conception of education as a fundamental method of social change. In 1930 Horton studied sociology at the University of Chicago and had conversations with Jane Addams, about her system of settlement houses as sites of local democratic practice among struggling immigrants. Horton was in search of models for a community school for working-class adults that would support self-led community organizing. In Chicago, a pair of Danish Lutheran ministers introduced him to the Danish Folk School movement, begun by Bishop N.F.S. Grundvig in the mid-nineteenth century. After studying the movement and learning



some Danish, Horton spent several months in 1931 and 1932 in Denmark, visiting folk schools where young adults were encouraged to analyze current social issues and then to actively participate in practical solutions. The school experience involved “study circles and discussion” in which participants taught each other by sharing their insights, each becoming a living text or “living word” to the others (Horton, 1998:53). In addition to group discussion and practical experiment, residents of the Danish folk schools sang together, shared poetry, and organized their householding chores, through which “people found their identity not within themselves, but in relation with each other” (Horton, 2003: 30, cited in Preskill, 2021: 59).

In 1932 Horton and Don West—a graduate of Vanderbilt University who had also visited Danish folk schools with the intention of beginning an adult learning center in the American South—co-founded the Highlander Folk School in Summerfield, Tennessee, as a community training center for southern industrial labor and farmers’ unions. “Highlander” was a dignified way to refer to a person living in the Appalachian mountains, as opposed to the pejorative term “hillbilly.”) Horton’s vision was that,

The school will be a place for young men and women of the mountains and workers from the factories. Negroes would be among the students who will live in close personal contact with the teacher. Out of their experiential learning through living, working, and studying together could come an understanding of how to take their place in the changing world (Horton, 1998:54).

Now known as the Highlander Research and Education Center⁵ and relocated in New Market, Tennessee, the school remains a place where people from communities facing particular challenges spend a few days or weeks together working, eating, singing, and studying, in order to help each other to better understand and define those challenges, to work out likely solutions, and above all, to develop trust in their own intelligence and leadership abilities, with the expectation that they will return to be grassroots leaders and organizers in their home communities.

⁵ See <https://www.highlandercenter.org>.

In the 1930s and '40s Highlander focused on farming and industrial labor issues and became one of the most important centers for labor education in the United States. In 1937 the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) made Highlander its first official training center in the American South (see Preskill, 2021:78; Thayer-Bacon, 2002:34). Horton's conception of labor education involved the metaphor of a percolator, in which ideas should be expected to bubble up from any source in a labor union, rather than the drip method, in which good ideas were expected to trickle down to the rank and file from union administrators (see Preskill, 2021: 120-121). The most radical aspect of this philosophy was Highlander's policy, beginning in 1942, that all of its residential workshops be racially integrated.

Highlander's most famous work began in the late 1940s when its focus shifted to civil rights. Rosa Parks studied at Highlander some months before she instigated the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama (see Theoharis, 2009). Other civil rights leaders who studied at Highlander include Ralph Abernathy, Ella Baker, James Bevel, Stokely Carmichael, Septima Clark, John Lewis, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Andrew Young. It was at Highlander that Clark (1990) began the Citizenship Schools program that quickly spread over the South, preparing tens of thousands of African Americans to pass the literacy tests required to register to vote in southern states - at the same time engaging them in political dialogues that motivated them to organize and join boycotts, marches, sit-ins and other kinds of political direct action.⁶ Because of its focus on labor organization, racial integration, and voting rights and other civil rights, Highlander was branded a school for communism and was vilified, spied on, violently attacked, and periodically closed, by southern state governors and police, the KKK, and the FBI. Horton himself was repeatedly beaten, jailed, and excoriated. The Center's continuing threat to agents of injustice was marked as recently as March, 2019, when one of its

⁶ "In the 1960s leadership of [this] program was passed to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). By 1970 SCLC estimated that approximately one hundred thousand blacks had learned to read and write through the Citizenship Schools" (Horton et al., 1990:xxv).



main buildings was destroyed by a fire, with white supremacist graffiti found at the scene.

The main meeting room at Highlander is an enormous, circular room with windows looking out in every direction and furnished with rocking chairs. There the Appalachian tradition of porch rocking, singing and storytelling becomes a democratic practice of social criticism, critical thinking, solidarity and political organizing. Horton described the format for these dialogues this way:

I think of an educational workshop as a circle of learners. “Circle” is not an accidental term, for there is no head of the table at Highlander workshops; everybody sits around in a circle. The job of the staff members is to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the participants feel free to share their experiences. Then they are encouraged to analyze, learn from, and build on these experiences.[...] The best teachers of poor and working people are the people themselves. They are the experts on their own experiences and problems.[...] They must know that they have problems which can’t be solved on a personal level, that their problems are social, collective ones, which take an organized group to work on.[...] What we sought was to set people’s thinking apparatus in motion, while at the same time trying to teach and practice brotherhood and democracy (Horton, 1998:148-52).⁷

As Highlander historian Stephen Preskill observes, “One of Horton’s chief commitments as a facilitator of democratic discourse involved close listening.[...] First, he modeled close listening in the large circle. Then people moved into small groups so they could practice close listening with each other. Next, he encouraged people to ‘listen’ closely for the problems they all held in common” (2021: 93-94). Preskill also notes that in Highlander workshops, Horton was regarded “as a kind of Socrates whose penetrating questioning allowed everyone to zero in on the truth.[...] Horton asked questions that pushed people to examine their assumptions [and] seemed to revel in getting students to question themselves and their cause” (2021: 205-206). Playing the role of devil’s advocate, “he often posed as a ‘liberal white man’ or an ‘average Negro businessman,’ prodding students to defend their actions from a consistent philosophical ground” (Preskill, 2021: 207). Just as importantly, Horton

⁷ Compare Horton’s description of circles of learners at Highlander with Dewey’s description of democracy above.

prodded participants at Highlander workshops to confront the emotional and psychological turmoil that comes with working for radical social change. James Bevel, who participated in the historic 1960 Highlander workshop for college students who had conducted sit-in protests throughout the American south,⁸ remarked that Horton “challenged you on your inferior feelings. He [made Black participants] think of themselves as men and women.[...] He [...] destroyed all the false assumptions of the oppressor” (Morris, 1984: 147-148, cited in Preskill, 2021: 205).

This unique experience of political awakening and collaborative learning was made possible both by Highlander’s geographic isolation—which provided the opportunity for physical as well as mental retreat—and its ethos of strong, if temporary community. In that regard, many activities borrowed from the Danish folk schools were integral to the practice of democracy at Highlander, including, “in addition to discussion of shared problems ... music and drama,⁹ long walks and square dancing, plenty of good food, rest periods, and stimulating conversation” (Preskill, 2021: 91). Indeed, the fundamental role of music in the American civil rights movement began at Highlander, where folk songs and religious hymns were adapted into “freedom songs” describing the struggle for social justice. Mostly sung in unison, songs like “We Shall Overcome,” “I’m Going to Sit at the Welcome Table,” and “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” helped to forge communities of solidarity and determination in the face of

⁸ Bevel became Director of Direct Action and of Nonviolent Education of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

⁹ Zilphia Mae Johnson, a musician and graduate of the College of the Ozarks who moved to Highlander in 1935 and married Myles Horton shortly thereafter, joined the school’s teaching staff and led its cultural program. In addition to developing Highlander’s singing and music program, she instigated the practice of leading participants in “composing and performing lively, fast-moving labor dramas [that put them] in conflict situations that felt real, giving students an authentic experience of walking a picket line or negotiating a contract [and helping] audiences identify more strongly with the conflicts that often arose between management and rank-and-file workers” (Preskill, 2021, p. 102; see also Highlander Folk School, 1939). We understand people’s theater such as the labor dramas at Highlander, the Theater of the Oppressed project created by Augusto Boal nearly thirty years later, and the Nuyorican Poets Café, founded in 1973 in Manhattan as another important tradition of democratic conversation about basic human concerns, on par with story circle and the community of philosophical inquiry. We think it is no coincidence that the annual international, residential summer workshops in philosophy for children run by the IAPC culminate in philosophical plays written, staged, and performed by the participants.



humiliation and violence. Zipper songs like “Oh Freedom” invite individuals to spontaneously add new lines to a standard verse, to fit their current situation; and freedom songs developed at Highlander have been readily adapted as they pass between communities and across time.

Perhaps because “Highlander chose to work outside the system to avoid being co-opted by official schooling” (Preskill, 2021:282), one of the lesser-studied aspects of Highlander is the influence it has had on educators interested in democratic practices and education for social justice. Among these is John Wallace, a professor (now retired) at the University of Minnesota, whose work explores how philosophy can contribute to grassroots social change. Wallace spent time at Highlander and helped found the Jane Addams School for Democracy in St. Paul, Minnesota. Throughout his career Wallace developed educational experiences that featured “democratic spaces,” which he describes as “spaces infused with a spirit of equality, without hierarchies of authority or knowledge, where choices about what to learn and how to learn it, what to do and how to do it, would be discussed and decided on by those affected by the choice (2007:135). Wallace adapted a protocol for dialogue from the Highlander workshops that he called “learning circles” or “story circles” in which participants are asked to tell a story from their own lives in response to a question that connects to the theme of the course. Wallace (2002) describes this protocol as follows:

The circle unfolds from initial questions framed by the facilitators based on the topic of concern to the circle. Often the most useful questions have the form, “Dig back into your experience and tell a story.” Some examples of the kinds of stories that are elicited include: tell us about a time when you first became aware of injustice. About a time when you first had the insight: aha, this is my work.[...] Concrete, detailed stories in response to questions of this kind let the members of the circle know each other better as human beings. They also illuminate the challenges that face us in our work back home and cause us to focus at the level at which we must act, the level of concrete detail.

What Wallace (2004:13) takes to be the most important characteristics of a story circle are what makes Lipman and Sharp’s community of philosophical inquiry, Thayer-Bacon’s Quilting Bee, Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, and other collaborative critical thinking practices fundamentally democratic:

the story circle as a practice of democratic, critical inquiry

- people feel safe to say what they believe and what they feel
- deep listening is easy and natural
- there is a spirit of equality, of mutual trust and respect; an assumption that each person has valuable experiences and ideas to contribute
- people are often surprised at what they say and what they hear others say
- there is a sense that the participants are creating together, here and now, on the spot in real time, the safe and humane space

Like Baker and Horton, Wallace understood that assertive, charismatic leadership is inconsistent with both the kind of democratic space conducive to a group's collective development. His own style of teaching and leading was gently Socratic, in a manner reminiscent of how Cornel West describes Baker:

I think in many ways Ella Baker is the most relevant of our historic figures when it comes to democratic forms of leadership, when it comes to a deep and abiding love for not just Black people [...] or poor people in the abstract, but a deep commitment to their capacities and their abilities to think critically, to organize themselves, and to think systematically, in terms of opposition to and transformation of a system.[... L]earning to receive from the people, not just guide, not just counsel, not just push the people in a certain direction, but to receive from the people the kinds of insight that the people themselves had created and forged [...]. And so it's grassroots in the most fundamental sense of grassroots. (2014:91)¹⁰

Wallace's longest-running program of a democratic space involving story circles is the three-week, residential philosophy course called "Lives Worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community" (better known as "Philosophy Camp") that he developed in 1998 with Lynn Englund (2005), Nance Longley and Peter Shea. The course brings together University of Minnesota faculty and staff, undergraduate and graduate students, and a number of visiting fellows, in a living-learning community described in more detail below. The course is held at Shalom Hill Farm, a retreat center about 160 miles from the Twin Cities in southwestern Minnesota and its principal activity is the story circle, held most mornings after breakfast, after which it is up to the

¹⁰ See also Preskill's account of Baker's involvement with Highlander at 2021: 211-216.



members of the community to plan the rest of their time together, including their shared responsibilities for cooking and cleaning. Replicating the ethos of Highlander workshops, the young adult participants at Philosophy Camp are treated, not as philosophically naïve students in need of expert instruction, but as fully-fledged human beings with abundant intelligence and talent, who have already accumulated a variety of rich experiences, and who are capable of serious reflection on the purpose of their lives and the kinds of communities that support those purposes. An important culminating activity also patterned on Highlander workshops invites participants to explain how they plan to transpose insights and experiences from Philosophy Camp into their lives and communities back home.

I learned about story circles at the 2008 conference of the North American Association for Community of Inquiry, where Shea presented a paper (2008) describing it and the community of philosophical inquiry as siblings in the family of democratic dialogue. In 2011 I attended a week of Philosophy Camp where I experienced the power of the story circle for myself, and in 2013 I spent a week at Highlander where I experienced for the first time in my life a community of radical equality. Since then, I have taught about Highlander and practice story circles in my philosophy of education courses at Montclair State University, as part of our study of social justice pedagogy. That pedagogy aims to wake up students and educators to the political dimensions of our experiences – including our experiences of schools – and to prepare us to struggle against the many kinds of injustice we discover as we do so. One story circle last semester began with the prompt, “Dig back in your memory and tell a story about a time when you benefited or suffered from some kind of unfair privilege.” The following comments provide anecdotal evidence of my students’ impressions of the dynamics of the experience and the educational value they attributed to it.

“The aim of the story circle was to tell experiences involving race, class, and gender. However, we found that the stories involved injustice based on age, family, nationality, documentation status, outsider vs. insider conflict, and nepotism.... The discussion was very much run by the students.”

“I also learned that some of the problems [others] faced, I also faced, and I was not alone.”

“I feel like what we talked about in class happened to be more of a life lesson rather than an in-class lesson.”

“I think that this dialogical practice would be useful in talking about politics ... because usually politic[al] discussions turn from a discussion into a debate and then into an argument. However, if people used this type of setup, they would be forced to listen to others['] beliefs without interrupting and everyone would get a fair chance to speak their views. This might leave people with a greater understanding for why people think differently.”

A significant innovation of the undergraduate courses at the University of Minnesota and Montclair State University is that they involve young adults, including teenagers, in the practice of story circle. While these students are legally adults, we meet them at a time of intense intellectual and emotional growth—and vulnerability. This raises ethical concerns with inviting them to share personal stories on political and other philosophical topics—the same concerns that have been raised about Philosophy for Children since its inception in the 1960s and about other curriculum that invites young people to bring their experience to bear on real-world issues. These concerns are generally answered by the protocols of both programs, which make verbal participation voluntary and reinforce interpersonal respect and communal solidarity. They are also answered by teacher preparation in responding to the psychological needs of their students, and in school resources and systems to assist teachers in doing so.

Then again, these concerns must be weighed against the need of children and young adults (and adults no longer young) to have spaces of intellectual integrity and emotional safety in which to both explore their ideas and feelings and to become accountable for them in a community of peers. To that end, for several years now, I have led story circles at the annual IAPC Summer Seminar in Philosophy for Children in Mendham, New Jersey, and invited participants there (including my co-authors) to reflect on its compatibility with philosophical dialogue and on its appropriateness as a



practice for younger children. Two associates of those seminars, Natalie and Ariel, relate their experiments using story circle in combination with philosophical inquiry with children, below. This innovation is more dramatic, given that, as Barbara Thayer-Bacon explains,

Horton decided he did not want to try to create folk schools for democratic citizenry at a mass level, and he did not want to work with children [...]. He did not want to start a school that would have to answer to state or federal legislation and he did not want to have a curriculum that was standardized and/or subject to examinations. Any discussion of what Horton would recommend for public school education must begin with the large caveat that he did not think his ideas would work in state-controlled schools. (2004:19)

Their experiences provide important, if anecdotal evidence of the efficacy, both of involving young children in story circles, and of combining that practice with the community of philosophical inquiry.

philosophy camp and the use of story circles (peter shea)

In 2001, after several years of experiments with weekend workshops, six people affiliated with the University of Minnesota launched “Lives Worth Living,” the residential course Maughn described above. At the center of this course is the story circle, an opportunity to tell a story from one’s own past in response to a prompt and to listen to the stories of other participants – students, faculty, and guests. This central morning activity is part of a daily ritual. Instructors meet for one hour after breakfast to craft the prompt for the day’s story circle based on a topic or theme that emerges from the community experience. The whole-group meeting begins with an acknowledgement circle, identifying people or events that helped each of us grow in the last 24 hours, and an announcement circle, mostly to put activities on the agenda for later. Then the instructors present and explain the day’s story prompt. A “Plato minute” follows: an impromptu mini-lecture relating the story prompt to themes in Plato’s *Republic*, the book that provides the philosophic skeleton for the course.¹¹ After

¹¹ When Plato constructs a model city in the *Republic*, he is undertaking the same kind of project that we undertake in the class: to imagine a new community that would avoid some of the problems of

a short recess, we reconvene for 90 minutes of storytelling and dialogue. Sometimes, the stories take the whole period; sometimes the leader invites responses and comments on the stories in a less regimented style of dialogue.

Each student has responsibilities every day for keeping the facility clean, preparing meals, and washing dishes. There are a few intermittent events scheduled during the week, including arts and crafts studio time; a practice of contemplation of a piece of art or other artifact, using a circle process derived from the religious practice of *lectio divina*; field trips to help us meet and understand our neighbors; and a special Saturday meeting addressing the issues that have arisen in our own community. Beyond this schedule, people's time is their own. Anyone (student or instructor) may suggest a group activity. People make things in the art studio, take walks on the prairie, play with the farm animals, teach classes, bake, and read poetry together.

People can count on a stable group of people being together at Philosophy Camp for about nineteen days: fifteen students, five instructors, two apprentice instructors, an emeritus instructor, and three farm staff. We have about 24 people at meals. We also welcome two visiting fellows each week: teachers, advisors, and interested people from outside the academy who come to observe our process.

We have the sense that the elements that have come together in this course fit together in educationally sensible ways. We find ways of tying all the elements together, as parts of a resilient and flexible structure necessary to a living-learning community. Story circles are loosely connected to the rest of the course, without an explicit integrating theory. Some of our story prompts anchor concepts that identify components of a good life: friendship, home, justice. Others exercise thinking approaches that we have found valuable: the search for the elusive "duck/rabbits" in our lives or experiences of unlearning things. Still others elicit stories that are well

contemporary Greek cities. His model is explicitly an alternative to another relatively new community: Athenian participatory democracy. So the *Republic* and its background can help us think about community structure and human well-being. As we discuss aspects of a good society—like friendship, adventure, safety—it is natural to connect those discussions to problems faced by the Athenian community and to Plato's innovations in his model city. We keep these connecting speeches short, informal and memorable, giving people reason to look at the text for deeper accounts.

suited to bind the community together: a story of a time when hope shifted for you or a story of what became of a youthful ambition. We do not build extended curriculum around the stories. Rather, the story circles nourish the relationships that form over three weeks. We have a sense that all the activities (the stories, the communal cooking, the field trips) are useful to different people in different ways. We put them into the space and then keep an eye on what emerges. It is likely that we see a very small percentage of what is happening. We try, by being observant and sharing impressions among the instructor team, to keep the space safe and the developments generally positive and reflective. Beyond that, we give up the illusion of control. Compare Horton's description of early participants at Highlander:

Our job was to develop local leadership for the new industrial unions [...]. They had to learn to think, make decisions – not learn gimmicks, not learn techniques, but learn how to *think*. So in an effort to help them understand the importance of learning how to think, we had them, with no strings attached, in full control of the week or two weeks they were there. They made every decision about everything: classes, teachers, visitors, subject matter. They resisted with everything they had because they had never had an opportunity to make decisions in a “school” [...]. (Horton et al., 1990:164).

How do story circles connect to critical inquiry? The first answer is that the story circle is the central element of an alternative community, constructed to challenge dominant notions of the successful life. We start with a random group of people who get to know each other in an immediate, face-to-face way, in an environment free of the usual distractions and escapes. We put together a sample community on new rules, to see how it works. If we like this way of living, it is natural to ask how much of what we like can be integrated into our normal lives or into the future that we build for ourselves. If we find that we like specific parts of this life – eating with others, telling stories, or sharing community tasks – how much of that can we integrate into our lives back home? It is hard to imagine how else one could interrogate one's notions about living well, other than by trying out an alternative way of living, in a space that gives one room to reflect.

The stories are also critical inquiry in a more particular way. They question individual choices, responses and attitudes, promoting those dispositions Ennis identifies as central to critical thinking that consist of taking a second look at our first impulses and impressions – dispositions to see the total picture, to keep an open mind, to consider alternatives. As the circle proceeds, we all imagine alternative approaches for ourselves, alternative ways of understanding what we are doing. Without necessarily articulating differences in concepts, we notice how one story bears on another, how one approach avoids problems that another approach encounters. Here is how one undergraduate Philosophy Camp student described his experience of the story circle:

[T]he circle where everybody goes around in turn and there's really no interruptions, you know that's something I found particularly valuable and that's something that I might like to try to introduce into the life that I live when I go back, just paying much, much more attention to what people say, because I haven't been doing that all my life, but when you get used to doing these circles, and you listen to what people have to say about hope or changing viewpoints, or other things, I suppose that really affects how you live your life; then you come to realize that [...] you can live a much more robust life by taking into consideration, deeply, what other people have to say and how they feel, and working with them can pretty much make your life a whole lot more worth living (Wallace, 2004:12).

Finally, the course itself is constantly under development, part of an ongoing inquiry. We are not sure what shifts for people when they hear each other's stories. It is clear that the stories make community formation easier. What else is going on, as people select the story they want to tell, change their minds as they hear other stories around the circle, recall the stories later, interact with other people remembering what they have heard – that is all to be investigated, as we try to understand the workings of an educational “machine” that has been satisfying and productive beyond our expectations.¹²

¹² It is hard to do research on an activity with multiple, complex parts, and so, at present, we have only reports and impressions to rely on. To focus on particular elements (the story circle, the common meals, the leisure) as contributing to a democratic atmosphere is a substantial task, especially since the class is not primarily a research enterprise. Over time, we may find ways to evaluate more precisely the consequences of particular innovations, such as exit interviews and follow-up studies.



extending story circles to childhood (natalie m. fletcher)

As we have seen, Myles Horton believed that we should learn to trust our experiences as important sources of knowledge, and he worked tirelessly to offer adults meaningful settings to do so, notably when it could help empower marginalized communities. He deliberately did not, however, choose to extend his emancipatory pedagogies of story-sharing to children. Yet if common understandings of philosophy—which have arguably been too narrow and exclusionary throughout history—can be challenged and refined to include children through the creation of thoughtful pedagogical interventions like the community of philosophical inquiry (see Burdick-Shepherd and Cammarano, 2022), could the same apply to story circles? This section will consider the possibility of extending story circles to childhood, first with a brief theoretical exploration of why such a move might be worthwhile and even morally desirable, then with some examples to concretize what such an extension might look like, and finally with an assessment of some of the opportunities and risks involved.¹³

Should the practice of story circles be extended to childhood? In Horton’s view, children lack the life experience necessary to tell stories in connection to big issues. Whereas adults can learn to acquire the analytical skills necessary to engage critically with their individual and collective histories, children have simply not lived long enough to amass such histories, and these tend not to be valued in their educational settings:

Unlike children in the regular school system, who have practically no past and are told by the schools that their present isn’t worth anything, [and] are taught about the future, [a]dults come out of the past with their experiences [...] from which they may not have learned very much, because they haven’t learned how to analyze it, but it’s there [...]. And our job is to help them understand that they can analyze their experiences and build on those experiences, and maybe transform

¹³ For the purpose of this section, “childhood” will denote primary school-aged children, though some later examples will also refer to adolescence.

those experiences, even. Then they have a power that they're comfortable with (Horton and Moyers, 1982:250-51).

Interestingly, while Horton interpreted this lacuna in adults as a call to metaphorical arms, his seeming underestimation of children's capacity as storytellers excluded them as candidates for his powerful story sharing practices. The question remains: Is this exclusion justified?

Theoretically speaking, beyond its impact on educational practices, Philosophy for Children has contributed to the emerging field of philosophy of childhood, notably by challenging what Matthews called the "deficit" conception, wherein a child is considered as a mere representation of missing capacities that adults normally have (see Glaser, 2022; Matthews, 2009). By demonstrating time and again the philosophical richness of children's experiences and their knack for philosophical thinking, the community of philosophical inquiry method highlights ageist mentalities and calls into question the broader ways in which children's epistemic contributions might be unjustifiably excluded, in a manner that risks being harmful both to them (in terms of how they are perceived and treated) and to knowledge more generally. Building on theories in feminist epistemology, such exclusion can be described as "epistemic oppression," which philosopher Kristie Dotson (2012) argues produces deficiencies in knowledge by reducing the capacity of certain people—in this case, children—to participate in knowledge construction.

To counter the possibility of such epistemic injustice, it is worth considering why extending story circles to childhood might be not only worthwhile but also morally desirable. First, it stands to reason that even if children do in fact have fewer stories than adults on account of their shorter time on Earth, this does not entail that their stories are any less valuable. In terms of activism, just as Horton aimed for inclusion of marginalized voices, it is important both politically and developmentally to offer children opportunities to reflect on their own lived experiences, since this helps them see themselves as emerging democratic agents with important perspectives worth sharing. Since story circles have the power to destabilize and redefine the concepts we use to make sense of our shared world, it seems not only epistemologically but also



ethically problematic to dismiss how children's own accounts of their experiences may contribute to these re-conceptualizations.

Further, story circles seem like a promising approach for childhood because of their accessibility: those of us who spend time with children are keenly aware of how they tend to relish in swapping tales about their lives when they feel safe to do so.¹⁴ As an alternative dialogue type, story circles can offer another avenue of philosophizing to young thinkers who may not be as comfortable with the kind of argumentative communication that often characterizes the community of philosophical inquiry. This potential recalls Iris Young's critique of deliberative democracy models that can yield "powerful silencers of speech" that privilege some "strong" voices at the expense of other "weak" ones. In her view, we must expand what counts as valuable communication forms beyond argumentation to include speech characterized by figurative language, emotion, humor and camaraderie, like storytelling (1996: 123). Narrative can expand the scope and integrity of our collective communicative agency by giving us "social knowledge from the point of view of that social position" and helping us "understand why the insiders value what they value" (1996: 128-131).

Viewed in this light, story circles in childhood could contribute to epistemic justice by including children via a medium that is conceivably more approachable than other means of democratic participation. Further, such practices could help shed light on children's knowing that may otherwise remain tacit to them and thus inaccessible to the rest of us, giving new scope to Horton's inspired affirmation that "[y]our knowledge, my knowledge, everybody's knowledge should be made use of. I think people who refuse to use other people's knowledge are making a big mistake" (Horton,

¹⁴ Without resorting to generalizations, my experience as a Philosophy for Children trainer has consistently underlined an issue for beginner facilitators around the avid sharing of stories during community of philosophical inquiry dialogues: a novice group of child inquirers will tend to offer stories in lieu of reasons when attempting to answer philosophical questions, meaning facilitators must learn to help them spell out the reasoning hidden in their anecdotes. Integrating story circles into philosophical practices with youth may therefore provide a meaningful opportunity for them to maximize this story-sharing tendency and mobilize it to strengthen their conceptual explorations.

Freire et al, 1990: 235). And so, assuming that the extension of story circles to childhood is a justifiable proposition, what might such practices look like concretely?

Following my introduction to story circles at the IAPC seminars in Mendham, New Jersey, and later my graduate fellowship at Philosophy Camp in Minnesota, I reflected on how to integrate this approach into my Philosophy for Children practice as another way for children to experiment with existentially rich modes of meaning-making. For 15 years now, the setting of my practice has been the Canadian educational charity Brila, which I founded to inspire young people through a fusion of philosophical dialogue and creative experimentation—or what has become the “Philocreacion” approach to philosophical inquiry.¹⁵ While purist in terms of its commitment to Philosophy for Children’s core principles and facilitation techniques, over time Brila has developed alternative ways of approaching the community of philosophical inquiry in an effort to reflect Lipman’s pragmatist insistence on a reflective educational practice that is appraisive and self-corrective, constantly analyzing itself in order to meet changing demands (2003: 18). Specifically, through Philocreacion, Brila has sought to address concerns around adultism and youth underestimation, while honoring the diversity of educational settings in which it conducts its bilingual charitable activities, from its day camps to its classroom sessions, after-school workshops and tailored programs in partnership with youth-focused organizations like theatres, science centers and art galleries. This assortment of settings has translated into the great privilege but also the significant responsibility of working with young people from myriad backgrounds, including indigenous, underprivileged, neurodiverse, refugee and new immigrant youth, some of whom have spent their first days in Canada doing one of Brila’s programs.

¹⁵ Named after the Esperanto term for *brilliant*, Brila’s charitable mission with Philocreacion is to develop critical reasoning, social responsibility and self-efficacy in young people through a combination of philosophical dialogues and creative projects—including the production of philosophical magazines or “philozines”—that seek to support their emerging agency as thinkers and doers. For more about this approach, see Fletcher 2020 and www.brila.org.

This breadth of participants—and with it, the array of needs and forms of engagement—has meant that the traditional steps of the community of philosophical inquiry have at times seemed overly structured in circumstances where everything from cultural to linguistic to economic barriers, coupled with divergences in learning and discourse styles, has demanded enhanced contextual sensitivity. With this in mind, over the years, Brila has developed half a dozen different types of dialogic inquiry, including an adaptation of the story circle model, nicknamed the Narrascopik dialogue to emphasize the notion of magnifying the scope of meanings found in personal narratives. In a typical session, facilitators offer a prompt that is philosophically oriented to motivate diverse personal narratives regarding a particular concept such as respect, belonging, power or justice. Children then take turns sharing a relevant life story without interruption or cross-talk for the amount of time they deem appropriate, while others listen attentively and take mental notes of emerging common themes. During the exchange afterwards, they collaboratively explore the ambiguities surrounding the concept and garner their insights about it, finding connections between shared narratives and across a plurality of voices, thereby learning afresh from a re-framed past.

Youth participants who have grown up with Brila's Narrascopik dialogue have described it as an aesthetically powerful encounter that awakens their senses as well as their sensibilities, while promoting states of heightened awareness, openness, non-distraction, connection and even gratitude. The stories are told in vivid detail right before their eyes, allowing them to viscerally experience the concept in question through the words and body language of their peers. Though the stories themselves are immaterial, since they create meanings in the moment, they simultaneously become affectively charged experiences with appreciable sensory, stimulating and stirring qualities: the energy of the circle fluctuates with the style and cadence of each interlocutor. By trying their hand as storytellers, children get to express themselves creatively in the title role of their own tale, weaving elements of their lives into a coherent, engrossing and noteworthy account for others to learn from and appreciate.

They may surprise themselves by how they end up telling their story, which resonates with the “thinking-out-loud” spirit of the community of philosophical inquiry and its fostering of unexpected insights and connections. When debriefing with others, they can feel their imaginative efforts as vibrating, pulsating possibilities and the story circle itself can serve as an impetus for enacting various options for agency. In this way, just as participants at Highlander were moved to action, children can realize real-world projects inspired by how they collaboratively envisaged what big philosophical concepts could and should mean in their lives.

For instance, let us consider a story circle experience that took place as part of Brila’s ongoing longitudinal research on collaborative meaning-making among youth.¹⁶ During a series of Halloween workshops, the charity’s youth board—composed of around thirty young people aged six through 18 who regularly participate in community of philosophical inquiry practices—decided together to engage in a Narascopik dialogue to think back to a time in their lives when they experienced a sense of fear. Once everyone had shared, the participants paired up to brainstorm the patterns and divergences they found in the stories, noting them on large white-board carpets placed in the middle of the circle. After only a few minutes, given their extensive experience with philosophical inquiry, the group had constructed the beginnings of a theory of fear based on the stories they had shared, complete with criteria, categories and consequences. Fear was associated with feeling voiceless and powerless; being self-conscious because of lacking knowledge; concern over inadequate skills; and the possibility of failing.

¹⁶ Certified by Concordia University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, this multidisciplinary longitudinal research study entitled “Thinking and Creating Together: Lessons from Youth’s Collaborative Philosophical Experiences,” focuses on a series of youth programs—including extra-curricular workshops and day camps—that have run July 2013 onwards through Brila. The participants, who range in age from five to 17, have met semi-regularly throughout the school year and during holidays to engage in community of philosophical inquiry dialogues and Philocreation activities. Pseudonymised data has been collected in the form of transcriptions from audio-recorded philosophical dialogues, samples of creative projects and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The study has required informed consent from both parents and youth, who can withdraw from the project at any time or choose to have certain data omitted.

Their own stories were enough to make them see just how complex the concept of fear is, and they began discussing its effects on how they perceive one another other, which inspired the philosophical question: Can we understand another person's fear? In the ensuing dialogue, the philosophical positions they developed were inspired by the ways that fear operated in the stories they had shared, which varied immensely from comedic accounts of being startled by a neighbor's chicken to more serious accounts of fear of the unknown identified by a child refugee and fear of change described by a teen whose parents were getting divorced. Whereas their ideas about fear prior to the story circle had focused on feelings of horror – what might be called a “stereotyped concept”¹⁷ influenced in this case by the context of Halloween – afterwards their definitions were much more closely connected to uncertainty and despair, given the content of their narratives:

- “Fear is when you're worried that you don't know what's happening ... although it kind of depends on you to exist.”
- “Sometimes you're scared because you're not secure. You just don't know how to deal with your fear so it takes you over.”
- “It's because you have never experienced what you don't know ... fear is how you react to the unknown when it's not enjoyable to think about.”
- “So there are only two things that are stronger than fear: hope and hopelessness. It's like an equation: if you take away hope and add fear then you get hopelessness.”

As a creative project to compliment their philosophical dialogue, the participants chose to design multi-sensory boxes to light-heartedly reflect the tentative claim they had reached – namely, that we can only truly understand another's fear

¹⁷ A “stereotyped concept” denotes a narrow, impoverished or oversimplified understanding of a concept that risks leading to dubious normative claims and ensuing actions. For a detailed description, see Fletcher, 2019.

through closeness with them or similar experiences. Fueled by Halloween treats and their collective brainstorming, they constructed boxes that invited others to use their senses of touch, taste and sight to identify with their fear of the unknown, in this case playfully symbolized by sour candy pulverized into unlikely beverages and peculiar textures. Later, they welcomed their families to test out their boxes to see if it was indeed possible to help enhance understanding of other's fears, which in turn inspired the spontaneous sharing of new stories in an impromptu circle amidst parents and siblings.

On its face, such narration may seem like a bizarre recommendation as a support to pragmatist-inspired critical inquiry in Philosophy for Children practices, not least because it consists primarily of monologues – which John Dewey characterized as “imperfect thought.”¹⁸ However, in trying to make their stories relatable to others, children engage one another in a significant inter-subjective transaction before they even begin to respond to one another verbally.¹⁹ On their own, the children may risk deluding themselves into believing that their concocted version of events is the real, right or only one, trapping themselves in relativistic or narcissistic thinking (“my story, my truth”) and “inquiring what belief is most in harmony with their system,” as Charles Sanders Peirce (1997:44) cautioned against. Yet with so many distinctive narratives to juggle in a “narrascopik” dialogue, the concept in question becomes unstable for children, fueling their curiosity about “how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meanings” (James, 1916:265). The opportunity to attend to a memory and reinterpret it in light of their current circumstances enables children to think *with*

¹⁸ Dewey views the modes of soliloquy and monologue as inferior forms of communication because they impede collaborate problem-solving. As Cam puts it, “Lacking a proper interlocutor, they are linguistically derivative and incomplete. They beg for a respondent, someone who listens to what is said and who offers advice or consolation” (1994:175).

¹⁹ Jean-Marc Ferry proposes a reconstructive ethic built on shared narratives that fosters recognition of others. As Bouchard explains, “Ferry relie le discours narratif au besoin vital de raconter ce que nous avons vécu – en particulier à la suite d’un évènement important – en portant à l’expression l’émotion qui relie cet évènement au moi. À partir du moment où une expérience est racontée, elle n’est plus simplement vécue ou subie, elle est dès lors transmise. La narration fait donc de l’évènement une réalité intersubjective” (2006:30).



the story, sparking reflection on their evolving beliefs and the interplay of different worldviews.²⁰

Certainly, to curate a safe space for such sharing, adults need to be aware of the opportunities as well as the risks, since story circle practices throw into relief their responsibility to be both receptive to children's voices and willing to try an emergent pedagogy where the results are largely unpredictable. Though the experience is often most meaningful when participants choose to share stories that strongly affected them, this process can make children vulnerable to peer pressure, inappropriate sharing and misinterpretations by others. Though similar risks can apply to adults, special care must be taken to mitigate against harm when extending story circles to childhood, notably so that children do not divulge confidential or sensitive information that may jeopardize their safety. Further, inclusiveness is not necessarily a given at first—complex intersecting social determinants may lead some voices to have greater authority and some interpretations to be privileged at the expense of others, making the adult's role all the more important. Some safeguards include: starting with prompts that are more light-hearted, emphasizing that no one is forced to share a story, encouraging children to choose stories they feel comfortable sharing, and reminding the group of the importance of attentive, respectful listening. It may also be advisable to wait until trust and community are established before incorporating story circles into a philosophical practice—in the same way that facilitators would opt against venturing into sensitive territory (through inquiry questions around violence, revenge or death, for instance) with novice inquirers or with a group of children who are still relative strangers.²¹

²⁰ Ronald Morris describes the notion of thinking with a story: "Par 'approche narrative, nous entendons une approche qui amène les élèves à penser avec une histoire et non pas simplement à penser aux histoires." (Bouchard and Daniel, 2010:62).

²¹ Such tough or heavy philosophical content must be addressed with careful facilitation by adults, as it may lead to what are called "high-stakes moments" at Brila, that is, moments in a philosophical dialogue when something is said or intimated that challenges youth's capacity for reasonableness, and thus calls for immediate intervention by the facilitator. For more detail, please see Fletcher 2019.

Of course, one could argue that any pedagogy that seeks to be truly child-driven – whether Philosophy for Children or story circles – is inherently risky since it requires that adults honor children’s interests and the paths they deem necessary to pursue these interests with integrity. Just as facilitators of Philosophy for Children are tasked with supporting children in their development of thinking skills and reflective dispositions so that they may become responsible philosophical inquirers, so too must they assist children in honing their abilities as storytellers through a careful curation of the kind of safe “democratic space” described by Wallace above. A complementary technique is to explicitly itemize the various elements of good narration, including attention to detail, appropriateness, imagery-rich description, concern for authenticity and genuine performativity, and the playful tension between humor and suspense.²²

Notwithstanding the risks and responsibilities, the possible benefits of incorporating story circles into Philosophy for Children are highly compelling, and it is worth briefly mentioning three. First, in terms of group closeness, the process of sharing narratives can create a very special intimacy between children in their burgeoning community of philosophical inquiry. Story circles help to take care of the community so that the philosophical inquiry can be done better, and because they feel more connected, children have admitted to caring more about doing the challenging philosophy work together. Second, the shared stories help to concretize the children’s conceptual inquiry so that they see the relevance of philosophy in the real world. The stories expand their repertoire of pertinent moral, political and phenomenological considerations, sensitizing them to the reasons that others may have for thinking and acting in particular ways, and granting them access to different social imaginaries. Even if a child shares a story that others perceive as problematic – for instance, because it introduces prejudiced beliefs – the lived experiences related in the story provide the

²² A simple tactile and visual aid for Brila’s Narascopik dialogue is a dice featuring cues instead of numbers – what? who? where? when? why? how? – to gently encourage children whose stories start off as anecdotes to enrich their accounts with more salient, gripping and illustrative details.



children with important contextual considerations to avoid snap judgments and encourage comfort with both ambiguity and complexity.

Third, story circles seem primed to foster epistemic agency: children witness in real time how their own stories contribute to their conceptual understandings of complex questions without needing to refer to “leaders” or “experts” from the adult world. They determine together what they have reason to value in relation to what others have experienced – their successes and their setbacks – with new angles arising that may have been overlooked without the stories as stimulus. Interestingly, children who regularly engage in Narasopik dialogue as part of their community of philosophical inquiry practice tend to request story circles when they feel like their collective conceptualization around a question needs work to help move their inquiry forward. The process of mining personal stories for oft-neglected wisdom gives another meaning to the notion of being a “well informed” critical thinker – which Lipman viewed as crucial to democratic citizenship: showing sensitivity to the particularities of concrete experiences while keeping an eye on the bigger picture, notably the theory unfolding through them.

Overall, the practice of story circles with children is a promising way of contributing to the enrichment of their mental landscape while leveling the playing field in terms of whose narratives are worth considering. In learning to tell stories around a concept and dissect them for their philosophical gems, children can enhance their critical inquiry into life’s big questions, seeing themselves not only as capable thinkers but also as generators of valuable ideas as a distinct subset of the population whose perspectives often go unnoticed, even willfully ignored. Presumably, that is a vision that Horton would have championed and thus represents an important extension to his revolutionary work.

philosophizing with personal stories in k-12 and university classrooms (ariel sykes)

I began to integrate story circles into my philosophical practice in traditional and non-traditional educational contexts after looking for a way of entering into a

philosophical dialogue that would authentically involve the voices and experiences of my students. I found that the philosophical novels, picture books, popular novels and short stories I used to stimulate dialogue interested my students enough to engage in lively philosophical dialogue, but I could see no evidence of impact of the community of philosophical inquiry on their lives outside of the dialogue. There seemed to be a disconnect between their understanding within that classroom community and the lives they led in the world. The power of personal examples within the community of philosophical inquiry encouraged me to consider the role such examples could play as a stimulus for the inquiries themselves. Following my introduction to story circles at the IAPC seminars at Mendham, New Jersey with Maughn and Natalie I began to pair story circles with CPI, and I have found this to be a bridge of empowerment: students learn to recognize the shared philosophical complexities in their lives and act upon these realizations in productive ways. The practice of story circles has an observable impact on student behavior and sense of belonging inside and outside my classroom.

While the act of storytelling is, itself, a way of doing philosophy (Shea, 2008), I generally use story circles as a prelude to a community of philosophical inquiry. I find that story circle practices supplement and complement philosophical inquiry practices in important ways: they develop awareness of oneself and others, including self-corrective behavior, increase the level of engagement in dialogue and future action, and create a space for embodied community building. I continue to witness the value of this practice in my current work within a K-12 independent school, and will now briefly address these three core benefits.

self- and other awareness

The story circle structure asks us all to reflect on a shared theme, which adds to the awareness that we are not isolated in our experiences of the world. A student of mine recently reflected: "While everyone's story was *so* different it was still clear to me how we all share this experience of struggling with freedom. This made me realize that freedom can mean a lot of different things but also the same thing." Recently, the ability



to collectively hear each individual's struggles with freedom has allowed for a more productive space to emerge so that we can engage in ethical inquiries around navigating tensions between our ideals and our choices and the pull of different types of freedoms. I find that story circles give us practice in attending to the various dimensions of our lives: our social, emotional, cultural, political, intellectual, spiritual selves. They allow us to bring our full selves to a discussion within a framework that encourages authenticity and a commitment to shared action.

By listening to others we come to learn new things about ourselves and also come to rediscover ourselves. It is a common experience within story circles for participants to remember experiences that lay dormant in their memory. A college student participant in a story circle recollected: "It was such an eye-opening experience. As I was listening to the stories of others I began to discover new stories within myself. Something you said triggered something in me and when it became my turn I found myself telling a story I wasn't planning on because it was in direct response to something I heard in your story."

This self- and other awareness developed through story circles supports the community of philosophical inquiry. I find that students include more diverging perspectives, work through disagreements more carefully, and navigate participation more equitably within the community of philosophical inquiry after taking part in a story circle. One middle school student recounted: "I feel like now, thanks to our story telling, that I am not as defensive or dismissive during our inquiries. I now really care about where everyone is coming from." As I embed story circles within my teaching and educator-training practices more frequently, I have come to believe in the importance of story circles for developing the empathy and open-mindedness necessary for sustained philosophical (and practical) inquiries.

engagement and action

We are more likely to engage when we find our voice and feel heard within a group. As students establish new habits of relating to one another through story circles,

they begin to see themselves as meaningful participants in their community. This move from isolation to interconnectedness, from being unknown to being known, from feeling invisible to being empowered, allows the individual to become invested in shaping the community. This investment takes the form of engagement in all joint projects, including participation in the community of philosophical inquiry. I find that participation is more distributed after the introduction of story circles as a practice in my classroom. Students are able to call each other when something said or done has a negative impact. Additionally, students feel empowered to advocate for themselves and others, to both their peers and teachers. The classroom community begins to realize what Horton espoused: "People have within themselves the potential, intelligence, courage and ability to solve their own problems" (Horton et al, 1990:87).

When story circles are paired explicitly with a community of philosophical inquiry, the investment in answering the question is heightened. One fifth-grade student stated: "I like how we used our own stories to think about the question instead of a book. It made the discussion more interesting and helpful for me." The connection between the intellectual work of philosophizing and the practical work of living becomes clearer when story circles are used. Students attend to the reasonableness of positions by testing them out in different contexts with an eye towards how they live in the world. Another college student remarked on how story circles helped her engage in philosophical inquiry differently: "At first I just thought inquiries were interesting discussions that we had in class. Like playing abstractly with ideas. Now that we have started doing the story circles before inquiries, I feel like I can see how inquiries can help me in my life. It's easier for me to connect ideas to examples in my life now." This transfer of learning is something we often hope for as educators, and I have found that pairing story circle with philosophical inquiry is a successful strategy for deepening the level of self-reflection and revision. As students reflect on the inquiry in terms of their personal stories, they are more likely to arrive at new understandings of their story and, consequently, of themselves.



embodied community building

A teacher who recently started practicing story circles with high school students shared with me that: “It created a space where everyone knew they would be heard and there was this positive silence. You knew that people were listening not to respond or rebut and this really changed the quality of listening.” In such a space, participants are given the opportunity to be known by others in ways that may not naturally arise given their traditional modes of interaction. In a time when students and educators feel isolated and disconnected, it is increasingly important to move beyond cliché community building activities and icebreakers. Story circles create a structure where leading with authenticity and vulnerability is expected and supported. Because the story you tell reveals something about who you are, the sharing of personal experiences is humanizing. Additionally, storytelling in this way allows us to bond in ways that break the status quo of complaining or gossiping. From my experience, asking students to share stories from their lives helps them to deconstruct the labels placed on them and to transcend the roles others see them playing within the classroom. Additionally, through listening to other’s stories we unearth connections with one another, such as a shared struggle or a similar perspective on life. One middle school student shared, “At first I was really worried about participating in class, because I don’t want to say the wrong thing. I was always worried whether people would like me. I think story circles really helped me get comfortable quickly, because we got to be real with one another. I’ve noticed that I am not as quick to judge other people and I know that others don’t assume anything about me just because of an idea or question I have.” Story circles seem to establish an ethics of care within the community that supports philosophical inquiry. I find that students listen more attentively, consider different perspectives with more seriousness, attend to non-verbal cues, invite more voices to be heard and fully commit to the joint project of figuring out the most reasonable answer together.

frequently-asked questions about story circles

In what follows, I offer some practical advice on conducting story circles, in the format of answers I have developed to some commonly-asked questions in the schools where I work.

what if students choose to share silly or superficial stories – that is they don't take the experience seriously?

From my experience, the story that begins the story circle shapes the stories that are told and the experience of the listeners and speakers. This is especially true for groups new to story circles as they are still feeling out what the experience like. If the person who begins shares a heartfelt and moving story, this opens up the space and welcomes others to do the same. However, if the person who begins speaks briefly or robotically, staying “at the surface of things,” this can impact the quality of others stories. For this reason, I share my story first with a group new to story circle practice, so as to model what type of stories are welcome within the space (with a tendency towards sharing a story that reveals me as fallible or vulnerable in some way). In other cases, once I know the group I am working with, I start off a story circle by specifically inviting someone whom, I hope, will set the group up to fully delve into the experience.

what if the story is “problematic” in some way (provocative, exposes a vulnerability, or is insincere)?

While this sometimes happens, we do not believe that it should prevent us from honoring the open and deliberate structure of story circles. There is something about being a part of a community that practices story circle, especially over a period of weeks or months, that minimizes this risk. The nature of story circles is such that it is impossible for the teller not to be influenced by the stories that are told before; there is a tone that is set within a story circle that serves as a moderating force. The community atmosphere is such that it buffers the sharing of provocative stories and cares for those who share their vulnerability. For example, the rule of no-cross talk, of not asking questions or otherwise interrupting the speaker, creates an atmosphere of



internalization: the story spoken becomes public but each individual experiences the story privately. Escalation of conflict is tempered and diffused by the lack of public reaction from others. This also helps to provide a space where vulnerabilities are held in caring silence because response is not expected or required. Also, as Peter mentioned above, in a story circle, people choose what and how much they want to disclose, how vulnerable they want to be (or not be) with others, and we are of the opinion that this is not something we should attempt to control. There is value in confronting our vulnerabilities and those of others, and there is value in becoming aware of tensions within ourselves and in relation to others and value in navigating how to participate in the community.

how can you productively deal with behavioral issues within this structure?

Many behavioral issues can be addressed both pro-actively and retroactively within a story circle context, so as not to interrupt the storytelling space. The facilitator might review what active listening looks and feels like before entering into a story circle. If some disruptive behaviors come up during the story circle, the facilitator may wait until later to address them, asking the group to reflect together on any barriers they are facing within the structure and how the community can work on improving the experience for everyone.

don't the structure and time constraints of a typical classroom make it difficult to conduct story circles?

When we give students the space to speak without interruption, we lose control of the timeline. The best we can do in the space of a class period is to try to mitigate this by how we set up the story circle: (1) be okay with having a story circle span over more than one class period or (2) divide the story circle into smaller groups. However, both of these solutions are less than ideal. The first option helps to foster community among all students; however, breaking up the story circle into parts influences how the stories impact the individual and community. The second option allows for everyone

the story circle as a practice of democratic, critical inquiry

to be fully immersed in the experience, but only serves to develop a sense of community among sub-groups and limits exposure to the variety of experiences in the classroom community.

is it not irresponsible to engage students in story circles, because teachers are not therapists and are not trained to deal responsibly with highly personal stories?

While people sometimes speak confessionally when sharing personal stories, this does not make story circles equivalent to therapy sessions. The protocols for story circles frame the interaction. No one tells anyone else what meaning to make from their experience; no one criticizes or advises another. The way the space is curated shifts how people listen, so that it is not necessary for the teacher to respond to a particular story (in fact, participants do not have the power to interrupt). The stories that are shared exist for the community, and there is no preconceived expectation for responses, only the expectation to listen fully to each story. This idea aligns with anthropological concepts of the relationship between speaking and listening genres (Marsilli-Vargas, 2014).²³ The way we listen creates a context, and this context in turn also influences how we listen (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Also, as Maughn mentioned above, teachers today are prepared to respond to some of the psychological needs of their students, and they are supported by school counselors and other resources in doing so. Additionally, I am upfront with my students about my legal obligation to report the abuse or neglect of children and violent criminal acts or threats by students.

how is this different from the share-and-tell or story time i already do in my classroom?

The structure and the purposes of story circles set it apart from other storytelling practices. The constraints around speaking, the purposeful selection of the prompt based on what the community needs, and the flexibility around how we interpret and tell our stories, create a distinct experience. It is this staging that allows the experience

²³ AS: I am grateful to my colleague, Abram De-Bruyn, who introduced me to this idea.



to transform the community and orient it towards the goals of shared understanding and action. Those goals are common among the various contexts for story circles that we have described in this essay: communities confronting injustice, a teacher education course unit on critical pedagogy, a residential philosophy course dedicated to the question of what makes a life worth living, and communities of philosophical inquiry in the tradition of Philosophy for Children.

conclusion

The question about how widely conversations about basic philosophical issues that ground democratic societies can be shared becomes more urgent, the more politically polarized those societies become. Critical thinking is a necessary aspect of these conversations, but in order to serve the aims of democracy it must be conceived as a social practice, as urged by Dewey, Lipman, Sharp, and Thayer-Bacon. Even that is not enough, however. Communal practices of critical thinking need to include other kinds of democratic conversation that prompt us to see others as full-fledged persons and to be curious about how our being in community with them makes growth and self-correction possible. Story circles are this kind of conversation. The story circles organized by Myles Horton combined stories of personal oppression with critical analysis and collective experiments in political action. John Wallace created a philosophical living-learning community in which shared stories are the basis of reflection on lives worth living. And the authors of this paper have combined story circles with the community of philosophical inquiry in Philosophy for Children. In each of these iterations, telling one's own story and listening carefully to the stories of others can be equally revelatory actions. Shared storytelling around philosophical themes necessarily involves both the tellers and the listeners in reflective, skillful and responsible thinking that naturally moves toward clarified and better-informed understandings of philosophical concepts, of ourselves and of others.

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