Communities of inquiry, competitions and capabilities: A cautionary response

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Abstract

Victoria has seen an increase in Community of Inquiry-styled competitions, where students and participant schools are pitted against one another, assessed and ranked according to professed philosophical Communities of Inquiry (CoI) criteria. This has occurred in the context of the introduction of the 'Capability' Curriculum in Victorian schools by State and Federal Education Departments. Assessment indicators common to both performance in CoIs and Capabilities have led many to consider CoI as one of the more promising pedagogies of choice. Various competitions model their events on the CoI format, but can they accord with the key characteristics that have historically defined this pedagogical practice? This paper seeks to examine the incompatibility between competitions that encourage contestants to gain superiority over others and the spirit of philosophical inquiry as conceived by the originators of CoI. Ultimately, we argue that competitions are largely incommensurate with philosophical CoI and suggest an admonitory approach if philosophy is to be associated with such competitions.

Key words

capabilities, Communities of Inquiry, competition, philosophy

1. Introduction

In recent years, philosophical Communities of Inquiry (CoI) have gained increasing traction in Victoria, due, in the main, to two developments:

1. The introduction of Capabilities in the Victorian Curriculum. These are 'a set of discrete knowledge and skills that [it is argued] can and should be taught explicitly in and through the learning areas but are not fully defined by any of the learning areas or disciplines [and that include] the provision of content descriptions and achievement standards'.[1] All Victorian teachers are now required to be able to identify, develop, implement, assess, and report on

    a. *Critical and Creative Thinking* capability

    b. *Ethical* capability

    c. *Intercultural* capability, and

    d. *Personal and Social* capability

2. The promotion of Philosophy for/with Children (P4/wC) teacher training programs in supporting the development of the above-mentioned Capabilities.

Accompanying the popularisation of CoIs has been the transformative possibilities that can attend the kind of dialogue that is characteristic of CoIs, serving to induct schools to the study of philosophy and, in turn, reorienting both teachers and students towards a different, more interactional, less transmissional view of learning providing educators with a much-needed addition to their pedagogical toolbox.

However, and perhaps not so coincidentally, the last few years have also witnessed the emergence of philosophical CoI-styled competitions (including Philosothons,[2] Ethics Bowls,[3] Ethics Olympiads[4] and Da Vinci Decathlons[5]).

But can CoI-styled competitions accord with the key characteristics that have historically defined CoI practices? What are the challenges? And can they be resolved? As current or past committee members of the Victorian Association for Philosophy in

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[1] https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/curriculum-design/learning-areas-and-capabilities

[2] https://www.philosothon.net/

[3] https://www.appe-ethics.org/about-ethics-bowl

[4] https://ethicsolympiad.yahoosites.com/index.html

[5] https://www.davincidecathlon.com/

Schools,[6] as well as former organisers, resource developers, facilitators and judges of some of these events, we argue that the challenges cannot so easily be met.

We argue, firstly, that such competitions interfere with the establishment of educational practices that support the development of philosophical dispositions, and secondly, that they diminish the ethical praxis of philosophy itself.

We begin with a brief overview of recent changes to the Victorian Curriculum that have contributed, in part, to making Victoria a fertile ground for the uptake of philosophical competitions.

2. The Capabilities

In 2015 Victoria's conceptualisation of the Australian Curriculum's *General Capabilities* (ACARA 2011) took effect with the inclusion of what was announced as a 'key innovation'; namely, its

> representation of the kinds of learning now characterised under the category of 'capabilities' as discrete and identifiable knowledge and skills that can be taught, learnt and assessed … This conceptual framework is reflected in the design of the Victorian Curriculum F-10 by the positioning of the capabilities as areas of learning in their own right rather than simply indicating how they might be drawn out in different learning areas …

> … This is not to propose that a capability such as Critical and Creative Thinking can or should be assessed in a form separated from the discipline-based learning area in which students are engaged. Rather, it is to be argued that the metacognitive capacities that students develop and demonstrate in different, specific, discipline-based contexts can be assessed and an on-balance judgement made about the level of achievement when measured against the Critical and Creative Thinking continuum.[7]

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[6]   https://www.vaps.vic.edu.au/

[7]   https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/curriculum-design/learning-areas-and-capabilities

In short, there was an acknowledgement in Victoria's conceptualisation that 'the capabilities are a set of discrete knowledge and skills, not a statement of pedagogies',[8] to be regarded as a developmental continuum, or progression of learning, and that all students would benefit from explicit instruction in these areas. Consequently, from 2017 onwards, all Victorian schools were required to identify, develop, implement, assess and report on the Capabilities and, for some, philosophical CoI practices emerged as the obvious pedagogy of choice.

Predictably, Victorian schools and the teachers who had been tasked with assessing and reporting on the Capabilities, like Critical and Creative Thinking,[9] now found themselves seeking an answer to the same question that has historically challenged those already working in the area of Philosophy for Children (P4C) with its community of philosophical enquiry pedagogy: Can capabilities like Critical and Creative Thinking and Ethical capability be assessed? Drawing on the evidence-based research, undertaken by Patrick Griffin (2009, 2012, 2014) and his expert team from the *Assessment Research Centre* at the University of Melbourne, and informed by the works of Glaser (1981), Rasch (1960) and Vygotsky (1978), the prevailing view was that they can be assessed using a developmental approach.

Recent advances in our conceptual understanding of learning and assessment, and in particular the paradigm shift away from a deficit model towards a strengths-based, developmental approach, made capabilities like Critical and Creative Thinking far less obscure and entirely possible to teach and assess. Critical and Creative Thinking and indeed all the Capabilities in the Victorian Curriculum have now been scoped and sequenced along a learning progression of increasing competence.

3. What does a developmental approach to learning and assessment look like?

Put simply, the developmental model of learning and assessment brings together the works of Glaser (1981), Vygotsky (1978) and Rasch (1960). Originally synthesised by Patrick Griffin (2007), the approach

> elaborates on the paradigm within which the aim of education becomes
> the movement of student learning along a path of increasingly complex

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[8]   https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/curriculum-design/learning-areas-and-capabilities

[9]   Interestingly, in their original conceptualisation, Critical Thinking and Creative Thinking were considered by ACARA as separate competencies. These were later merged to create what is now a single capability.

knowledge, skills and abilities. Under this model, the teacher's attention is focused on a student's readiness to learn so that the instruction can be designed to build upon the current level of learning. This developmental model sits in contrast to the deficit approach, which instead focuses on diagnosing and then remediating the things a student cannot do. (Griffin 2014, p. 28)

In other words, the developmental approach 'recognises the developmental level at which students are actually operating, and targets instruction to focus on the skills and knowledge the student needs to develop in order to move to the next level. The focus is on development, not deficit' (Griffin 2014, p. 15). It is also a conceptualisation of learning, Griffin (2014, p. 28) notes, that aligns with Robert Glaser's (1921–2012) theoretical framework of assessment interpretation known as a criterion-referenced interpretation (Glaser 1981):

> The cornerstone of his framework is that knowledge acquisition can be conceptualised as a continuum, ranging from low to high proficiency. Points on the continuum are identified by behavioural criteria that indicate a particular level of proficiency has been reached. Thus, the aim of criterion-referenced interpretation is to 'encourage the development of procedures whereby assessments of proficiency could be referred to stages along progressions of increasing competence' (1981, p. 935). (Griffin 2014, pp. 28-29)

How, then, can Glaser's criterion-referenced interpretation of assessment, coupled with Griffin's developmental approach enable one to develop Capabilities like, for instance, Critical and Creative Thinking in the classroom?

The answer is that all the necessary ingredients that a teacher would need to design, implement, assess and report on critical and creative thinking in a classroom are already at their disposal and would consist of:

- A developmental continuum that captures a sequence of learning progressions (as is found in the Victorian or Australian Curriculum),

- An appropriate developmental taxonomy, which can assist teachers in the identification of increasing levels of sophistication for targeted knowledges, skills, attitudes, or dispositions. Examples of such taxonomies include Bloom (1956), Dreyfus (2004), Biggs and Collis (1982) and Krathwohl et al. (1964),

- A criterion-referenced assessment interpretation/framework for a given learning activity, which indicates a student's position on a continuum of developing competence in relation to that area of learning, and

- Learning activities that allow for the eliciting of behaviours (knowledge, skills, attitudes or dispositions) across the expected level/s of competence for a given indicator (e.g. a Community of Inquiry, concept game, Socratic seminar, etc.).

Notice that Victoria's developmental approach to learning and assessment, rather than comparing students' learning progression against that of their peers, is measured instead against a continuum of developing competence in relation to their area of learning. Little wonder, then, why community of philosophical of inquiry pedagogies, like P4C, with their emphasis on cumulative classroom talk and use of non-deficit focused language, are particularly well positioned to fill the pedagogical gap sought by Victorian teachers. Communities of Inquiry, after all, are characterised by children engaged in communal discourse that is collaborative as they inquire about a problematic issue. Epistemic progress, though not always assured, is dialogic rather than monologic, constructivist rather than transmissional. Whilst making use of some philosophical concepts, content delivery is minimised in place of dialogue, appropriate for and accessible to children, and where cumulative talk is favoured over disputational talk. This interactional approach allows children to

> build on each other's ideas, offer each other counterexamples, question each other's inferences and encourage each other to come up with alternative views and solutions to the problem at hand and follow the inquiry where it leads. In time they come to identity with the work of the group, as they cooperatively build meaning and commit themselves to an on-going, self-conscious reconstruction of their worldviews as the inquiry proceeds. (Sharp 2014, pp. 16-17)

4. A philosophical Community of Inquiry – psychological conditions

As has been argued above, the philosophical CoI is enthusiastically promoted as a site for scaffolding students' learning in several Capabilities. And we will argue that it is a particular kind of environment, or culture 'a certain kind of place' (Splitter 2006) defined partly in physical terms (for example, with participants seated in a circle), but especially in normative and affective terms. We consider whether competitions are compatible with the CoI.

A CoI offers a unique opportunity for students to engage in public discourse under the conditions of confidentiality and collaborative rule setting—with facilitators practised in facilitating the soft fall for those who feel they risk being mistaken. Such an environment provides participants a safe place to build their capacity to think freely and speak openly; to take intellectual and personal risks without fear of punishment or loss of face (Sharp 2014). 'Taking a risk' might mean speaking up in class, trying out a new idea, considering a politically incorrect or taboo claim, challenging the status quo or a leader, seeking assistance from peers.

The responsibility of educators to provide a safe environment for learning is confirmed by educational psychologists (Burleigh & Meegan 2018; Elliot et al. 2018; Kohn 1986/1992; Murray 2019). Worthy of consideration is the claim that learning typically takes place when a person feels they can afford to take risks enabling them to extend their capabilities—where they are required to move beyond their comfort zone and into their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). When flight and fight responses are activated, the person relies on habituated responses aiming at survival rather than personal growth. In the extreme case trauma researchers implore us to consider the following:

> we cannot expect to engage a student in logic, reason, or consequences while they are in a fight-or-flight state. Simply understanding that students are incapable of reason while escalated can shift your perspective and responses.[10]

A culture of competition challenges the defining feature of a CoI as an environment where students are safe to experiment with ideas, beliefs, and claims, and to take risks which optimise their philosophical learning. Kohn (1987) observes: 'when higher level problem-solving or creativity is involved, there is no surer way to undermine quality than to set up a contest'. Suffice it to say: 'learning occurs in optimal circumstance of emotional rest'. (p. 2). On the other hand, research shows that competition can be an adequate motivator for simple rote tasks (such as learning to use 'because' following a claim) (Kohn 1986/1992). We suggest that these lower order outcomes developed in competitive frames are preparatory, but they are not significant to the learning that takes place participating directly in a CoI.

Furthermore, competition focusses attention on the performance of high achievers, (Elliot et al. 2018); indeed, on those who have already acquired the relevant

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[10] https://empoweringeducation.org/blog/trauma-informed-teaching-part2/

capabilities. In a high-stakes environment it is likely that the more capable students find opportunity to display their skills, whilst learners retreat to passivity. Murray (2019, p.13) further observed that lower achieving students 'will avoid demonstrations of their ability because they think that they cannot compete at a higher level, nullifying any positive effect in the class'. In the worst-case scenario, it is observed that in the context of competition, students become 'upset and unmotivated instead of participating in a lesson or classroom that is engaging' (Murray, 2019). Competitions may be used to showcase high quality performances but are not sites for learning. We caution that the collateral effects of competition are at odds with the principle of inclusiveness and care which the CoI pedagogy defends.

Risks in entering a competition might include: having to hold your own in a circle of strangers with whom you have little chance to negotiate rules of engagement; awareness you are being observed and judged by strangers who may not have won your confidence (such as people introduced as 'academic philosophers'); feeling responsible for scoring for your school, being aware your classmates are dependent on you to accrue a winning score yet they are not in any way present to assist you in your performance.

Competition organisers need to determine whether tribal loyalties and personal aggrandisement, attaching to scoring protocol, and the giving of trophies and medallions, removes the opportunity for learning. Kohn (1986/1992) distinguishes between two kinds of competition that can undermine higher order learning.

1. *Structural competition*, defined by objective features of an activity, such as a set of rules that makes success a scarce commodity: 'you lose if I win' and vice versa.

2. *Intentional competition*, defined by personal desire to be number one, to triumph over rival players or teams—indeed, a tendency to see them as rivals in the first place.

The distinction informs our recommendation that intentional drivers for competition need be transformed into more cooperative modes of interaction via structural features as exemplified in the caring thinking dimension of a Community of Inquiry; and specifically that structures supporting competition need to be minimised. We can choose to remove elements of structural competition that ensure 'someone wins, someone loses', such as scoring, ladders, finals, awards. We can choose to spend sufficient time on creating a safe and caring learning space.

Bearing this caution in mind we move to a discussion of how the CoI is distinguished from other social groupings, drawing on the findings of team of scholars headed by Marie-France Daniel, CIRADE[11] at the University of Montreal, Quebec.

5. Community of Inquiry – social conditions

It is said that Peirce (1877) originally coined the term 'Community of Inquiry' to characterise the ways scientists work together on a problem. He argued that increase in sociality is directly proportional to that in inquiry. The CoI is defined as 'an emergent structure promoting inquiry through community ("distributed thinking") and community through inquiry' (Oliverio 2012, p. 7). Ongoing empirical research conducted by the CIRADE team of scholars (2000) demonstrates that the evolution from lower order thinking to critical thinking, and then to dialectical argumentation, occurs effectively in the context of a group evolving into a CoI. Figure 1 presents these concurrent lines of development.:

3
Community of
Philosophical Inquiry
Dialectical
argumentation

2
Micro-society
Critical thinking

1
Group
Lower-order
thinking
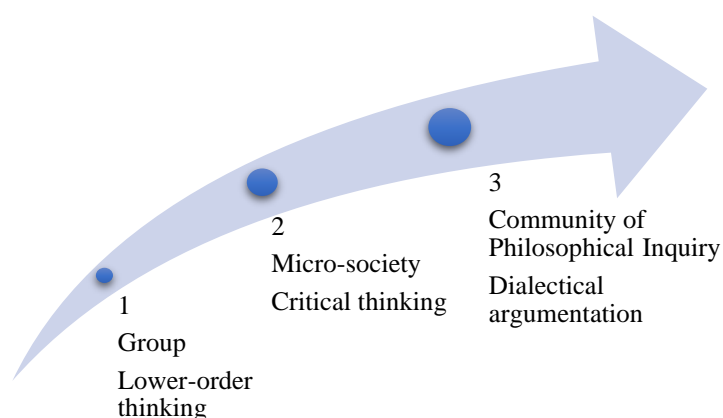
Figure 1: The development of cooperative behaviours within the Community of Inquiry is related to the development of critical thinking among peers (adapted from Daniel et al. 2000, pp. 4-6).

Thus, an arena in which one exercises critical thinking skills is not yet a CoI; a CoI is an emergent form, transforming from group, through micro-society to community (Daniel et al. 2002, p. 46). The educational hypothesis is that it is essentially this final transformation that starts the reflexive process known as philosophical inquiry. This research shows that a CoI gradually emerges as a forum for dialectical argumentation through interventions by participants (Daniel et al. 2000). The normative rules do not simply anticipate and forestall obstacles to dialogue and cannot simply be put in place

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[11] CIRADE: Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur l'apprentissage et le développement en education.

in advance by the teacher or competition organisers. Thus, ability to participate in the formation of a Community of Inquiry, acting as rule makers rather than simply rule followers, is indicative of philosophical development. Participants build the norms in response to emergent problems within the community, testing the proposed rules and protocols that they hypothesise will enable constructive dialogue around philosophical issues. In other words, participants collaborate in the co-construction of the learning environment, and their capacity to do so is an indicator of growth and their capacity for higher-order thinking. This would be a minimum requirement for any rigorous CoI-styled competition, and one that is difficult to provide opportunity for in inter-school competitions.

Furthermore, how much time, if any, do competitions provide for participants to propose and negotiate the rules of engagement? Many events take the form of selected groups of students from various schools attending a central venue where they are divided into mixed school groups and set pre-determined questions to be discussed. The reality is that students will bring diverse rules to the singular cohort they work with at a competition forum, and these rules may not be relevant, or understood by others, or even recognised by the facilitator. One anticipates there is a lot of important work to be done in this initial phase when a group of strangers meet; vital preparatory work that is usually attempted over an extended period of time in the school context and often revisited and iterative. Without it, one cannot speak of the emergence of a CoI.

Given our misgivings and experiences, we suggest, that CoI-styled competitions involving school-aged contestants, by their very nature, inhibit progression to anything beyond the 'micro-community'.

6. Community of Inquiry– epistemic conditions

As noted by Oliverio (2012, p. 7) pragmatists usually define inquiry as a 'struggle to attain a state of belief'. Doubt is presented as an irritant, whilst Belief provides relief. If we are not moved by 'a real and living doubt' our inquiry deteriorates into 'idle discussion' (ibid). Thus, it is suggested that any inauthentic doubt will merely produce an inauthentic belief. Once again, the organisers of CoI-styled competitions could consider this caveat, as such an occurrence necessarily means the 'CoI' event fails to operate as a CoI. In Peirce's words:

> Some scholars have imagined that to start an inquiry it was only necessary to utter a question whether orally or by setting it down upon

paper and have even recommended us to begin our studies with questioning everything. But the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief. (1877, p. 5)

Externally driven cultivation of doubt works only to the extent that later a genuine doubt emerges 'as a second step' (ibid). Others observe that the 'manipulated doubt might eventually rival the presence of naturally occurring doubt and degrade potential inquiry' (Hildebrand 1996, p. 41).

Lachs (1999) proffers the Peircean notions that logic is both 'rooted in the social principle' and that to 'be logical, men should not be selfish'; which has been further elaborated as, 'the ultimate purpose' of the Community of Inquiry as 'the breakdown of the walls of the self' (p. 80). A CoI is only successfully formed once participants express authentic doubts and the community engages with these philosophically. These ideas will be elaborated more fully in Section 8 below.

7. Community of Inquiry – as 'habitus'

We introduce the notion of Habitus to further elaborate the idea of a CoI as 'a certain kind of place'. As defined by Navarro (2006, p. 16) Habitus is a place created through social, rather than individual action, leading to patterns that are stable, and are transferrable from one context to another. However, Habitus 'is not fixed or permanent', and 'can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period.' Thus, these patterns, whilst enduring, may shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. This too may be said of CoI.

As has been argued, CoI are purposely designed to produce multi-zoned learning environments, rather than being Olympic arenas where high achieving students simply display their skills. In contrast, competitions include a singular event (or short series of events) that do not constitute a CoI unless formally linked to prior and future learning opportunities. Can these links be provided within the context of CoI competitions? We are sceptical that they can be, at least not in their current form of competition. Attempts have recently been trialled by the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools (VAPS) in partnership with a range of other educational providers to use existing GLAM sites (such as Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) to generate events where one central contested idea is explored in a

number of different contexts across the academic year.[12] Such events, celebrate and showcase philosophical inquiry, without the drawback of damaging competitive structures.

If participants are not selecting the provocations, not setting the problems, not addressing genuine doubts, not putting in place norms, not proposing bridging ideas to continue the inquiry, there is little opportunity for a CoI to emerge. This conclusion is based on the premise that a COI is an evolving organism driven by active agents who hold themselves and each other responsible for the structure of the group, the agenda and the progress of the inquiry. An analogy might be comparing a one-time visit to a model home with the formation of a home in real time and space; certain elements may be showcased but the authenticity lies in the ongoing engagement of participants with the issues raised, particularly around the development of contextualised norms and inquiries. This idea may be further elaborated in connection with that of Bourdieu (1984) on 'habitus':

> Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these. (p. 170)

In this sense, habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, 'without any deliberate pursuit of coherence … without any conscious concentration' (p. 170).

Having explored connections between the Capabilities as desirable learning outcomes, and CoIs as valuable pedagogical learning environments for nurturing these capabilities, we have cautioned against? adopting competition as a learning site for philosophical inquiry. In passing, we note that competitive games and activities in themselves may be useful in teaching lower-level skills, such a use of thinking tools or practising of skills. We now address the question as to the relationships between these educational concerns and the doing of philosophy.

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12 For example, the concept of a Right at Mandela My Life exhibition at Melbourne Museum, Gandhi Exhibition at the Immigration Museum, Animals at Zoo, Frontier Wars at National Gallery of Victoria and Science Works. One of the defences for the introduction of COI-styled competition has been its role in popularising philosophy among educators. VAPS has found a way of celebrating philosophy by taking it to public places where it is embedded in cultural organisations affording these activities a high status in the lives of students.

8. On language and competition

We have argued that philosophical CoI works best within an evidenced-based educational and developmental framework. It is true that there are many elements in philosophy that may be said to compete, for example:

- the products of philosophical labour such as ideas, definitions, arguments, theories, schools of thought;

- the producers (individuals and institutions) of philosophical artefacts such as writers, speakers, schools, education departments, higher education, and

- contexts of philosophical performance such as armchairs, classes, workshops, Communities of Inquiry, journals, lectures.

And it is possible that any of these phenomena may generate a conception of philosophy as 'inherently competitive'. However, it is assumed CoI practices are dedicated to the development of collaborative dialogic skills and dispositions. Hence, if philosophy is shown to be inherently competitive, P4C cannot be treated as a 'subdiscipline of philosophy' as claimed by the editors. It is excluded on the grounds that it is 'inherently collaborative', and only competitive for extrinsic reasons. This paradox will be examined in this final section where we focus on the framing of philosophical activity as essentially educative.

Are CoI-styled competitions compatible with the spirit of philosophical inquiry in general? In using such events as instruments to scaffold philosophical skills and dispositions, is there an inescapable danger that they may miss the point of doing philosophy and thereby stand outside philosophy itself? The problem lies in the fact the method does not relate at a fundamental level to the ideals of philosophy and therefore competition is not compatible. To illustrate this incompatibility, let us begin with the way in which language is used by philosophy and competition to make visible this point of difference.

It is quite clear we can find arguments that the pedagogy of the CoI is modelled on the Socratic dialogues of Plato and is a form of doing philosophy while learning about philosophy (Kennedy 2011; Lipman, Sharp & Oscayan (1980); Scholl, Nichols & Burgh 2009. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates is put into a position of defending himself against the accusation of not respecting the gods and corrupting the youth of Athens who participate in his philosophical dialogues. Socrates puts forward an apology and argues his case against the charges but not in the spirit of an adversarial competition.

The act of apology should not be understood in the modern sense of an expression of regret and redress for wrongs done but instead according to the ancient Greek sense of an argument that is a defence in response to a judgement. Socrates argues that he is far from corrupting the youth of Athens, instead he teaches the 'care for the best possible state of the soul' (*Apology*, 30g) and he encourages his interlocutors to question because the 'unexamined life is not worth living' (38a 5-6). Philosophical teaching in this sense is not sophistry because he does not arrive at an answer to resolve the questions aimed at him. He does not summon up arguments in the form of a debate to score a tally of points or for his own self-interest.

However, can the same be said of competitions? When we see Socrates engaged in philosophical dialogue, he is engaged with important issues in our lives such as what constitutes the good life, what is justice and how to be virtuous by maintaining his ignorance and humility and requiring the collective dialectical exchange and elenchus from his interlocutors to make meaning of these common, central, and contestable issues. His methodology is part and parcel of the philosophical inquiry undertaken.

Argumentation in competitions can encourage a rhetorical use of language. Language in this context can become instrumentalised and useful to attain goals such as scores, prizes, and recognition, whereas in a philosophical inquiry, language is centred on dialogical and dialectical creativity with interlocutors in a communal and ethical effort to make meaning that is itself important for the community. The difference is that in competition language becomes a rhetorical tool for scoring points and prize-winning ends. The contrast is stark.

It could be argued that someone may accept the above claim about the instrumentalisation of language in rhetorical argumentation. And they could at the same time conceivably accept their competitive models of inquiry such as Philosophy Bowls and Philosothons are a form of philosophical inquiry. For example, the Philosothon[13] page advertising its next competition is an example where the author associates competition with philosophy and implies that the skills and dispositions its competition promotes are compatible with those that philosophy strives for. And they reference this acceptance by most educators to support this view (although no evidence is provided on the website for this quantitative assertion about 'most' educators):

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[13] https://philosothon.xyz/

> A Philosothon is concerned with big questions … Each school selects
> between 5-8 students to represent the school and together they explore
> philosophical and ethical issues through dialogue. While some have a
> problem with the fact that this is a competition most educators recognise
> the healthy respect for the ideas of others which is fostered in a
> Philosothon. Students can change their mind during the course of the
> discussion.[14]

The organisers of Philosothons who promote their business with the suggestion of a
compatibility between philosophy and competition can find aspects of philosophy by
which to characterise their competition. However, the fundamental difference in the
intentionality of language cannot be overcome between these two types of dialogical
inquiry. There is a categorical difference in the purpose of dialogical inquiry between
competition and philosophy. And to claim that most educators see value in the
competitions is to mask an arguable case. There is at least a discourse to be had on the
pedagogical implications. Let us turn our attention to two replies one can make here.
The first reply is in relation to the pedagogical point about educators and the second
is about the role of rhetoric and philosophy.

Firstly, research has shown there are educators who hold the opposite view to the one
suggested above. In researching pedagogical transformation in 59 teachers, Scholl,
Nicols and Burgh (2008, p. 11) concluded that the language of dialogue in a CoI was
aimed at lifelong learning outcomes rather than immediate prescribed curriculum
outcomes or high stakes test results (Daniel 1988, pp. 13-19).

> Philosophical dialogue within democratic communities of inquiry acts
> as a catalyst for both teachers and students to become engaged lifelong
> learners, who are able to exercise clear thinking, develop philosophical
> understandings and problem solve with others through democratic
> processes. (Scholl, Nichols & Burgh 2009)

It can be acknowledged that in competition one is demonstrating philosophical skills
and dispositions and discovering philosophical concepts. But the instrumental
external end of a goal or prize is introduced into the experience of doing philosophy
and that needs to be a justified incursion into the intrinsic pedagogy of philosophy.
(While it is true that in Victorian schools the introduction of the Capabilities
curriculum is what has turned some to turn to CoI pedagogies, teachers do not have

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[14] https://philosothon.xyz/

the added complication of needing to redress the problem of peer-to-peer competition.)

The second point is about drawing a clear distinction between philosophy and rhetoric to distinguish philosophy from the activities of sophists who practiced rhetorical argumentation for the sake of ends other than the goals of philosophy. For example, Marina McCoy interprets Plato in the *Gorgias* in a way that 'draws a sharp line of demarcation between the activities of philosophy and rhetoric, favouring philosophy over its obviously inferior opponent (McCoy 2007 p. 85). In the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* Socrates discusses the role of philosophy in society and how we should view philosophy. In the *Gorgias*, a key argument from Gorgias is the view that philosophy should be used as a form of rhetorical art of persuasion (453a 2-3). Rhetorical art can appeal to convention and popularity to empower the strong and master the weak (502a6-c12). Tushar Irani (2017, p. 19) interprets Callicles to be espousing the purpose of argument as a means to overpower others and fulfil self-interest. Consequently, others are of only instrumental value, as 'competitors' to be manipulated or defeated. However, Socrates represents an alternative ethos for philosophy and it is reflected in the language and art of care (*Gorgias* 464a). The key difference between the rhetorical and the philosophical *ethos* lies in the desires that motivate their practitioners (Irani 2017, pp. 65-66). If we accept the CoI as a philosophical practice and competitive games as analogous to rhetorical arguments, then there is a difference in their respective ends and therefore are not compatible.

The significance of this critique of rhetoric is not therefore just in its contrast with philosophical dialogue but also in the ethical relationship with others that is implied by a Socratic model of philosophical dialogue.

9. On ethos and competition

Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1969) interprets Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, to be arguing that rhetorical discourse is not engaging in philosophy because one is not in a just relationship with the Other; rather the relationship based on rhetoric is one of 'ruse', 'emprise' and 'exploitation' (Levinas 1969). Similarly, we can argue that education is ultimately not merely about the instrumental devices we as teachers may bring to the classroom to foster more effective learning, it is just as much about the care we show in trying to achieve a good outcome for our students. Gert Biesta (2015) argues against an instrumentalist view of education and points to an ethos of aiming for the good.

> All this also shows—and this is perhaps the most important point—that in the design, enactment and justification of education we have to engage with normative questions. This is why I have emphasised that it is of crucial importance that we engage with the question of good education and do not make the mistake of thinking that it suffices to talk about effective education. (p. 80)

If we accept Biesta's argument, our ethos of striving for the good in education is an opportunity for the CoI to be a demonstration from participants to not merely settle for instrumental outcomes but strive for a moral end to education. This theme is prevalent in much of the literature of the CoI where one's ethical disposition is a pre-condition for dialogue, and the notion of caring thinking is meant to demonstrate this disposition. Fundamental in the writings of Ann Margaret Sharp (2014) is this idea of 'caring thinking'. By striving to demonstrate Sharp's caring thinking in a CoI, students and teachers instantiate and confirm the relational and existential commitments we make when we are in philosophical dialogue.

> Caring thinking suggests a certain view of personhood and a pedagogical process. It also suggests a particular environment for the cultivation of such thinking. I am referring to the process of communal inquiry and the democratic environment of the classroom community of inquiry. It is as if you can't have one without the other, if you are interested in cultivating caring thinking among children on a large scale. (Sharp 2014, p. 16)

It seems from these considerations that an ethical commitment toward the Other is the pre-condition to philosophical dialogue, and we see how that end may be compromised by the extrinsic ends one finds in competitive dialogical exchanges. From the history of Western philosophy, we know that Socrates came off as the biggest loser in the competitive forum of Athenian justice. The lesson from this example is that Socratic dialogue is, at a fundamentally important level, not compatible with competitive games not because he 'lost' according to the rules of adversarial rhetoric and sophistry, but because we should not succumb to the lure of instrumental means to ends that are not philosophically meaningful. This resistance entails a commitment to a pedagogy that cannot be divorced from the praxis of philosophy.

10. Conclusion

So, can CoI-styled competitions accord with the key characteristics that have historically defined CoI practices or are they anathema? Whilst one can do one's best to mitigate or minimise 'structural competitive' elements that corrupt philosophical inquiry, there exist inherent features of competitions that necessarily conflict with the ethos of philosophical inquiry. These include temporal constraints that compromise the collaborative growth required for establishing and maintaining a philosophical community of inquiry and the shortcutting of problem-setting and disregard for aporetic beginnings upon which philosophy is born. Nor are CoI-styled competitions compatible with the spirit of philosophical inquiry in general. There exists a fundamental intertwining between pedagogy and philosophy. And in that relationship, there is an integration between the pedagogy of the CoI and philosophy itself which represents a renewed view of education. This view of philosophical education is not compatible with adversarial games of competition.

> Community of philosophical inquiry represents an integration of philosophy and education such that the problematization, deconstruction and reconstruction of concepts becomes a fundamental aspect of all educational discourse. (Kennedy 2011)

The novelty of competitions, whilst often immersive and entertaining, represent a continued challenge to philosophy and education requiring a cautionary response.

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