

## Citizenship through Community of Enquiry

---

**School/centre:** Eastbank Academy

**Age range:** S5/S6

**Education for citizenship contexts:** curricular areas and young people's participation

---

### Enquiry and Citizenship

Citizenship is a fundamental concern to the main pioneer of Community of Enquiry, Matthew Lipman. His approach is rooted in the democratic pragmatism of Dewey and Peirce. Dewey argued:

'What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life.'  
(Dewey, 1966)

He believed that learning comes from a communal reflection upon experience.

The conventions of Community of Enquiry are simple: when the stimulus text has been read, the students take thinking time to devise questions which the text has raised for them. Every question is written on the board – in the language of the student, so that the student clearly owns the question. The student's name is appended to the question to ascribe ownership. The group then choose a question and begin to discuss. The 'enquiry' aspect is supported by the ruling that each participant will begin their contribution with '*I agree/disagree with ... (name of last speaker) ... because ...*' as this format, though at times awkward, endeavours to hold the track of the discourse in a forward-moving direction. Meanwhile, the 'community' aspect is understood by the pupils as an ethos of mutual support, and students understand the necessity of treating fellow community members with respect and consideration. The classroom becomes a community of enquirers.

'Philosophical enquiry is concerned with the empowerment of students to take confidence in their own thinking and the process of developing understanding along with their co-workers. It is devoted to creating conditions where student questioning can flourish. Problematic issues are encountered and examined. Students are encouraged to make connections and distinctions, to speculate, to build concepts and arguments and to develop hypotheses and analogies. All these things aim to enhance the quality of learning. The students deliberate amongst themselves and this process of deliberation is internalised by the individual students: they become more reflective and begin to think for themselves. These classroom deliberations evoke thinking that is skilful and deliberate, thinking that employs relevant criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context. It is not just any kind of thinking, it is critical thinking.'  
(Lipman, 1991)

Robert Fisher's approach to enquiry is equally rooted in the notion of citizenship. Like Lipman, Fisher places great import on philosophical enquiry's potential contribution not only to help provide students with a more sophisticated critical tool for thought, but also to foster development in moral judgement and democratic citizenship. In the face of a rapidly changing, globalised, post-modern society, he comments:

Students faced with a future in an unpredictable world will need to gain the skills that will give them the greatest control over their lives and learning, and for this they will need to think critically and creatively at the highest possible levels, and to develop an awareness of global issues and problems.  
(Fisher, 1998)

Fisher and Lipman's approaches are comparable to the experience of Paulo Freire's assault on the 'Culture of Silence' in the Latin-American slums. The silent masses must be given a voice.

'Education is cultural action for freedom ... an act of knowing and not of memorization.'  
(Freire, 1972)

### Session 1

The enquiry session which is most relevant to the current study is the first session, which used as a stimulus the text of a Close Reading practice paper comprising an abridged version of a speech delivered by Hillary Clinton to the UN Fourth World Conference of Women. After reading the text of the speech round the group, students formulated the following questions:

- If we rely on women so much, why are they being allowed to die out? (*Nikki A*)
- In today's modern society, to what extent are women still being sexually discriminated against? (*Claire Y*)
- This article is very negative: why can we not have more articles based on the positive aspects about women? (*Keji O*)
- Is this passage sexist against men? (*Ian M*)
- What relevance is there, if any, in the fact that the conference is being held in Beijing? (*Stuart J*)
- With the passage being so negative, how is the conference a 'celebration' of women? (*Alan R*)
- 'We come together in fields and factories...' Why does Clinton make the comparisons between women of different cultures and social classes? (*Nikki M*)
- How much are governments to blame for women's conditions? (*Chris K*)
- Is anything being done to sort these problems? (*Jocelyn W*)
- Does Clinton *glorify* women's roles to make them seem more important than they are? (*Nikki M*)
- Does it affect our reading of the passage that it is the speech of:
  - a powerful, extremely wealthy, white American?  
and/or
  - a woman who is famous as a result of being married to a powerful, famous husband/man? (*Claire Y*)

These questions make clear the fact that students want to go much more deeply into the premises and concepts of a passage than the traditional questions set by the SQA allow.

### Proposing

Various discursive skills can be highlighted. The *quality* of students' proposals is an area of creativity that enquiry can throw up a plethora of examples. Session 1 began with the question: does it affect our reading of this passage that this is the speech of women who is famous as a result of being married to a powerful and famous husband/man? The first proposition of the session then, questions the very authority of the text:

*CY: I feel that it undermines the passage because Hillary Clinton is more of a figurehead than anything. She is meant to be idealistically a submissive wife, the good American wife. She is not really meant to have any power. Also it's highly unlikely that she wrote the speech ...*

The sophisticated nature of such a proposition would very rarely surface in a more traditional approach to close reading, and yet it is the first question raised by this student and leads on to a fascinating 15-minute discussion of the implications of authorship.

### Disagreeing

The traditionally difficult classroom practice of disagreeing is again required by the linking format of Community of Enquiry rules. Because this is laid down, explained and expected, it

reduces much of the fear and sting of disagreeing that inexperienced debaters face. A difference of opinion can be handled without conflict or rancour due to the *community* aspect of the process. Indeed, disagreement comes to be understood as desirable and productive – more so in fact than agreement. Agreement means you are left with one idea to think about; disagreement means two ideas!

The point made earlier about the inappropriate situation of Hillary Clinton speaking for oppressed women, for example, did not go unchallenged:

*NA: I disagree with CY. I think that Hillary Clinton did write it herself. Just because she is married to Bill Clinton, does that mean she is not allowed to have her own opinions?*

*NM: I agree. I don't think it's that relevant whether she wrote it or no, cos it's common for important people to have other people to write their speeches. But she does agree with everything ... She's a busy woman – she's a wife and a mother. She's also involved in politics and charity work and things like this – like the people she's talking about in her speeches – she's got a lot to dae.*

The consistent format of the approach allows quite extensive and important disagreement to take effect without acrimony. Only at two points during the five sessions did passions rise: during the first session when the question arose of whether the Clinton passage was 'sexist against men'; and in the final session when participation in discussion was being analysed. On these occasions, argument was carried out with real passion involved, yet the internal discipline of the process meant that debate did not descend to a mere 'slanging match'.

A process which helps acquaint students with the civilised, democratic and constructive use of disagreement is a powerful tool which would be welcomed in any sphere of citizenship, whatever the age or social background of the subjects. Many voices have been raised in the Schools Improvement movement outlining the need for teachers who are creative thinkers, respectful of diversity of views. Louise Stoll argues that schools must appreciate staff who voice opinions contrary to the mainstream:

School culture must honour individuals, 'mavericks', because creativity and novelty will be required to deal with an unknowable future and prevent 'groupthink'.  
(Stoll, 1999, pp 46–47)

If this is true for staff, it is equally true for students. The Community of Enquiry approach provided a tactic which allowed constructive disagreement to occur in the majority of cases.

### Attacking/defending

This rhetorical device, based on value judgement and a failure to recognise the value of another's contribution, was a rare feature of sessions. However, one such incident was witnessed when the question was examined as to whether the Clinton passage was sexist 'against men'. The question virtually divides those verbally participating into gender camps. And yet discussion remains fairly open and skills of proposing, disagreeing, clarifying, attending and responding can still be discerned even when passions run high.

The proposal that the passage is sexist is argued along the lines:

*IL: It's always about women's families ... it's like a man's no part of the family, just like a bolt-on accessory ... he's just there to make babies aye ... it should be a joint thing, it shouldn't be either way.*

*NA attempts to clarify for the group a central point of the article: I totally disagree with IL. They're talking about how women are. The problems that women face are caused by men.*

*IL attempts some defensive blocking, making use of the second-person address for the first time in the discourse to further identify what he sees as different sides in the discussion: This main point of this passage is human rights ... human rights is man and women. It's no to dae with just women. Men are treated just as bad sometimes.*

At this point, the enquiry reaches its most intense emotional stage. CY declares her intent in a half-joking, all-serious assertion:

*I'm just going to disagree with IL **very angrily**.*

Group-coping skills are on the line here and the teacher feels compelled to issue a reminder of ethos: *Remember the community aspect of what we are doing.* CY picks up on the first-person response, identifying the camp she sees herself in, and responds with rhetorical questioning and rhetoric:

*You said that we need human rights. Well how can women have equal human rights if we don't have rights the same as men? How is that human rights, if you deny women the basic things? Like years and years ago when your supposed human rights only involved men? We weren't allowed to vote. Is that a human right, to choose who was in control of you? Is that not a basic human right? But yet we were denied it and it's denied in some countries still today. A human right is to wear and dress and have freedom of speech yet women are denied that in some countries ... and we're still denied it here. Right, so you talk about another human right, right to an education, yet women in other countries only have permission to have education through their male counterpart. Shall I keep going on? There's more. Do you want me to go on about human rights? Well, how can you turn round and say, 'Well, women's rights are human rights', when we don't have them?*

The teacher at this stage notices that IM is looking agitated and affected by the strength of emotion generated. He has been indicating a desire to speak, but has now put his hand down:

*Teacher: IM, could you say something?*

*IM: I was going to say something, but he sort of said it (pointing to SJ).*

*Teacher: What was it you were going to say?*

*IM: I've forgot now. I swear I've forgot my point. Everybody's rabbling on.*

At this point KO attempts to summarise for the group and find some sort of common ground, using language in an attempt to heal rifts. Her group-coping intent is commendable – although it sells out much of the argument of injustice perpetrated against women in contemporary society:

*I think the big thing is inequality. We are all individuals ... we all have our own deep opinions; but we shouldn't dwell on the past. You will have some men who are in power, who will want to use that power the way they want to, but we can't dwell on the past.*

The group have commendably navigated through some rough waters here and have managed to come out the other side still able to continue discussion in a civil manner. The structure and ethos of the enquiry methodology have provided the group with a pilot to guide them through real intellectual and emotional difficulties. IM's contribution has been neutralised by the heat of emotion and KO has felt the need to compromise her beliefs to hold the group together, but these would be fascinating areas for the teacher to analyse with the

group at a later stage. Enquiry provides a forum where real issues can be safely opened up and explored. It is interesting that IM – the student who has taken a bit of a pounding in this session – can say during the evaluation of that session:

*It's better because you are getting other people's points of view. Like I'm getting my point of view, but everybody else has got their different point of view ... We have all of us got different points of view.*

### Metacognition and higher order skills

In the specified activities of the Higher English course much is made of the validity of talk and discussion in preparation for the examined elements. Discussion is furthermore seen to be appropriate for encouraging the development of social and working relationships. Learning and teaching approaches for close reading 'should be active and candidate-centred, utilising a variety of tasks and activities including teacher exposition, class and small group discussion of texts and individual study' (SQA, 2002).

Again, the enquiry approach is nothing if not 'candidate-centred'. The 'variety of tasks' is as varied as the students' imagination. 'Teacher exposition' is severely curtailed, but 'class discussion of texts' flows freely.

The evidence of the close reading enquiry sessions carried out in the study gives ample verification for the value of the procedure. The discussion about authorship of the Clinton passage has already been noted. Experience would indicate that in discussion of a close reading passage, such complex questions of authorship and their relationship to the meaning of the text would rarely surface. Again, later in the same discussion, a similarly sophisticated argument about textual authority comes to light. The question has been raised as to whether the speech is sexist because it concerns itself with the oppression of women while nothing is said about the oppression of men.

*NA: I don't think it's being sexist at all – it is a conference about women, right? But it says it's an abridged version. There could have been a whole half of this speech that has been missed out and that could have been about what men do for women. If it gave the whole speech then maybe we could say.*

*IM: I'm disagreeing with NA. We're talking about what's wrote down and what's no wrote down. We're talking about what's been wrote down. How can you say how bad it is for women if you have no got it to weigh up against how bad it is for men?*

Here the students are seen to raise and struggle with complex issues of editorial control, identity, certainty and the possibility of knowing in relationship with the text. These are group-coping skills being exhibited, raising the sort of metacognitive questions one would expect from highly experienced and skilful participants in discussion. Questions of motivation, morality and power are proposed and challenged in lively discourse:

*CY: It's not actually a woman in power giving a speech to a world conference – if she had just never married the president she wouldn't have even had had the chance to go up and say that speech.*

*NM: I disagree with Clare because ... I think she was really clever about that and she knows that if it wasn't for Bill Clinton she might no be in the position to give speeches ... but that doesn't mean that it should undermine what she's saying ... people are gonnae listen to what she's gonnae say...she's trying to use power for people that aren't in such a good position as her ... like starving children in Africa.*

*IM: I disagree with NM. There's many people that are accessories to power and they don't have valid things to say, but just because they are famous they have a right to say it. What about Michael Jackson? – He's famous and he says you can*

*sleep with children – is that right? She might just be saying this because she's the president's wife. We don't know her personal opinion.*

This is a level of debate which goes beyond the bounds of what would normally be considered during a close reading exercise. The enquiry technique has given these students the autonomy to follow a line of thought in the direction of their interest and it has led into a fascinatingly reflective and fruitful area of investigation. These insights must be helpful in creating a context in which to engage with, examine and better understand the passage. The last word comes from one of the students:

*See before, if I had've done this on my own and wrote an essay on that passage I think I could have probably got a good B for it. But see now I've got different arguments and I've got points and I've got arguments for and against?... Knowing each other's ideas instead of just having your own ... it's like ideas uniting – and disagreeing or agreeing gives you points for and against. You've got a wider viewpoint on it which would help you getting a better mark.*

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Dewey, J, *Democracy and Education*, New York and London: Free Press, 1966. First published 1916
- Dillon, J T, *Using Discussion in Classrooms*, Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994
- Fisher, R, *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom*, London and New York: Cassell, 1998
- Freire, P, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972
- Lipman, M, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985
- Lipman, M, *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991
- Stoll, L, 'School Culture: Black Hole or Fertile Garden for School Improvement' in J Prosser (ed), *School Culture*, London: Chapman, 1999