

*The Challenge of Assessment for the Community of Inquiry: Negotiating Individuals  
and Community*

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In the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement inaugurated by Matthew Lipman, Lipman and his followers have always recommended a dialogical model for children to practice philosophy – flowing from the ancient tradition of the Greeks. The increasing desire in education for the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills has breathed new life into this ancient tradition. Lipman's Community of Inquiry (COI) model (1976) promised to help children overcome the alienation of contemporary lifestyles through engaged dialogue and collaborative thinking. However, given the imperatives of a school system and the need for assessment to ascertain students' attainment of knowledge and skills, the challenge is for teachers to meaningfully assess philosophically rich discussions in an equitable (fair, valid, reliable) manner. This contribution seeks to engage the growing P4C movement with the conversation on assessment.

One key concern with assessment of dialogical skills developed through the COI is precisely the need to balance an assessment of the child as individual with the need to see the child as an integral part of a wider conversation. Exclusive focus on the individual was an unrealistic abstraction. Focus only on the group risked ignoring the distinctive contributions of individuals. *Est modus in rebus*. Some middle ground had to be found. This paper traces the development of an assessment approach that seeks this balance.

In *Discussion as a way of teaching: tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (2005), Stephen Brookfield was interested in promoting classroom discussions as a form of teaching and learning and although he had some helpful things to say about evaluation, his approach did not include a full fledged formal means of assessing discussions and thus there was still much room to explore in the development of an assessment model for P4C's COI discussions.

This paper traces one of the top girls' schools in Singapore in its journey in coming up with an equitable manner to assess the students who are engaged in COI.

### Background

Each educational institution will have to tailor its curriculum to its students. Likewise, the school in this study chose Philosophy as a curriculum anchor to underpin the intellectual development of its students who are female adolescent High Ability Learners (HALs). Philosophy is not a common subject for adolescents, in Singapore or elsewhere. And if done, it is usually done as an extra-curricular enrichment subject offered for only the HALs within that particular institution. Due to the school's student profile, Philosophy is offered to all pupils in this school as part of its curriculum.

Philosophy is not taught as a content-rich subject but more as a skills-enabler. The aim is to develop the girls in the art of philosophizing where they have to collaborate

with one another to co-create knowledge. This is also in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies model where the various skills (not exhaustive) as listed below in Figure 1 are taught not in and of themselves but in order for students to prepare themselves for collaborative problem-solving and knowledge creation in an increasingly interconnected environment:

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies

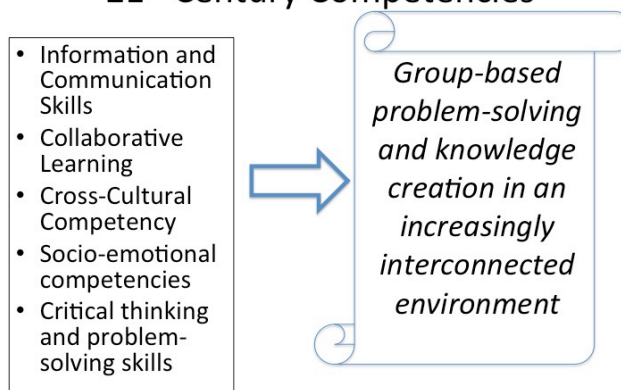


Figure 1: Competencies and Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

We can also see (from the Figure 2 below) [adapted from Gunawardena et al (1997)] that this emergent need to equip students with the skills necessary for collaborative inquiry towards the goal of co-created knowledge is an important one that present-day educators need to address in their curricular, pedagogical, and assessment approaches.

	Phase	Processes	Actions
High degree of knowledge construction ↑ Low degree of knowledge construction	V	Application of newly constructed meaning	As students inquire collaboratively and teach one another reciprocally, their further discussion reflects new knowledge construction.
	IV	Testing and modification	The negotiations trigger further experimentation, collecting data, review of literature and consultation with experts.
	III	Knowledge co-construction	Considering others' viewpoints, students negotiate their diverse ideas and direct them towards a collective understanding.
	II	Exploration of inconsistency among participants	Students contribute ideas and the ideas are different from each other.
	I	Sharing and comparing of information	In groups, students discuss identified problems, set goals and determine group processes with guidance from teachers.

Figure 2: 5 Phases of Knowledge Construction [adapted from Gunawardena et al (1997)]

In coming up with the schools' own model of assessment, we proceeded through several iterations. Each assessment model exposed certain limitations which prompted a review and the development of a revised assessment model.

The problem (Pre-2010): Focus on the Individual, Overly Analytic

In pre-2010, the assessment was focused on 12 discrete moves<sup>1</sup> taught to and expected from the students. These 12 were observable moves from the categories of “Active Participation”, “Respect and Openness”, and “Quality of Thinking”.

		Moves made
RESPECT AND OPENNESS	1	Actively fosters an <b>atmosphere of respect</b> for dialogue partners
	2	Is willing to <b>modify her views</b> in the light of evidence presented
	3	Respectfully engages with opposing views by offering meaningful <b>counter-arguments</b>
ACTIVE PARTICIPATION	4	Demonstrates her attention to the discussion by accurately <b>re-stating or paraphrasing</b>
	5	Demonstrates her attention to the discussion by asking relevant <b>clarificatory questions</b>
	6	Helps advance the discussion by <b>taking stock</b> of the various views put forward
QUALITY OF THINKING	7	Elaborates one’s position by supplying <b>relevant examples</b>
	8	Uncovers <b>assumptions</b>
	9	Traces the <b>implications</b> of a position
	10	Identifies <b>fallacies</b>
	11	Makes relevant <b>conceptual distinctions</b>
	12	Suggests a <b>working definition</b> to help focus the discussion

Figure 3: Pre-2010 list of COI moves

However, this checklist was found not to be satisfactory. Firstly, there were too many descriptors. Even though not all 12 moves will be simultaneous, it is difficult for any teacher to observe and note the different moves made by each student in a sitting with 6 to 12 students. Secondly, it is difficult to differentiate a reticent student who has been actively listening and awaiting her chance to contribute, from a confused student who cannot follow the discussion. Thirdly, the rubric was also overly analytic and focused too much on the individual. The assumption seemed to be that students would be able to display the significant moves during the time-bound assessment.

Working through the problem: Shift away from Discrete Items towards Holism

In November 2009, after a 3 full day internal Annual Department Conference held to re-examine existing syllabus and practices, the Philosophy Department then collapsed the category of “Respect & Openness” and “Active Participation” into that of “Participation”, and changed the rubric from a highly analytical one to a holistic one based on pre-conceived pen pictures. In any authentic discussion, it is not possible for all students to demonstrate all the 12 moves meaningfully. For instance, when

<sup>1</sup> Developed in-house by Raffles Girls’ School Philosophy Department



there are no fallacies made, then there is no opportunity for students to identify any fallacies. The principles underpinning the new assessment document were Richard Paul's Intellectual Standards and Bloom's Taxonomy. 2 samples of the document (Fig 4a and 4b) are shown below:

RAFFLES GIRLS' SCHOOL (SECONDARY)  
 RAFFLES PHILOSOPHY COURSE  
 YEARS 3 & 4 COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY RUBRICS

Participation (Active Participation, Respect and Openness)	
Excellent (13-16 marks)	Proficient (9-12 marks)
She participates actively in the discussion while taking time to listen attentively to the contributions of her peers. She thus displays intellectual curiosity in the topic and an openness to learn.	She participates readily in the discussion without the need to be called upon. She thus displays interest in the discussion.
She makes sustained effort in advancing the inquiry.	She makes substantial attempts to advance the inquiry.
She shows respect and patience for the views of others by actively including her peers in the discussion.	She shows respect and patience for the views of others by trying to include her peers in the discussion.

Figure 4a: Sample of 2010 COI rubric


RAFFLES GIRLS' SCHOOL (SECONDARY)  
 RAFFLES PHILOSOPHY COURSE  
 YEARS 3 & 4 COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY RUBRICS

Quality of Thinking (How does the pupil deal with philosophical concepts and arguments?)		
Excellent (13-16 marks)	Proficient (9-12 marks)	Adequate (5-8 marks)
She has precise understanding of the central philosophical concepts in the article. For example, she paraphrases the concepts concisely for further clarification and/or raises questions about them.	She is able to accurately grasp central philosophical concepts in the article.	She has partial understanding of central philosophical concepts in the article.
She applies these insightfully in the discussion such that they probe the heart of the issue.	She applies philosophical concepts thoughtfully in the discussion such that they revolve around the issue.	She applies these in a simplistic manner such that her contribution does not add value to the discussion at hand.

Figure 4b: Sample of 2010 COI rubric

Present Reality: Acknowledging Collaboration, Emphasizing Holism


There was however still dissatisfaction with the revised document. The holistic approach made identifying precise areas of weakness difficult and did not help teachers in the coaching of the students on specific skill-sets where extra practice was needed. More precise categories were thus still deemed helpful in developing students' skills. And thus the broad "Quality of Thinking" criterion was distilled into 2 key individual competencies of "Questioning" and "Asserting" (See Figure 5a below).


**Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)**  
**Raffles Philosophy Course**  
**Year 3-4 Community of Inquiry Rubrics**

Skill Areas/ Marks	4 marks
<b>Questioning</b> (Are my questions clear, relevant, and significant?)  <b>Weighting: x2</b>	Questions posed are <b>consistently clear and relevant</b> , and offer <b>significant help</b> to the community in advancing the inquiry.
<b>Asserting</b> (Are my claims, reasons and examples clear, relevant, and significant? Are my arguments coherent?)  <b>Weighting: x2</b>	Claims, reasons and examples are <b>relevant, consistently clear, and offer significant help</b> to the community in advancing the inquiry. <b>Nearly all</b> of her arguments are <b>coherent</b> .

Figure 5a: Sample of present day COI rubric (Individual Component)

At the same time, the review also considered the group context. To omit this was to bias the assessment towards individual performance. It tended to foster individualistic behaviours that could be detrimental to the overall quality of discussion. In response to this recognized need, there was a specific inclusion of a group component that focuses on the Community creating and maintaining a safe and conducive environment (hygiene factors) for discussion (See Figure 5b below).


**Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)**  
**Raffles Philosophy Course**  
**Year 3-4 Community of Inquiry Rubrics**

Skill Areas/ Marks	4 marks
<b>Maintaining a safe and conducive environment for inquiry</b> (Did the group: • → Adopt a respectful tone and register? • → Practise turn-taking? • → Give due consideration to viewpoints?)	<input type="checkbox"/> → The Community consistently maintains a safe and conducive environment for inquiry.
<b>Ensuring collaboration</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> → The Community consistently ensures that all members contribute to the inquiry process.
<b>Advancing inquiry</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> → The Community develops and moves between elements of inquiry in an adept manner.

Figure 5b: Sample of present day COI rubric (Group Component)

This is the current rubric in use at the moment. Some of the shortcomings identified in the previous models have been successfully dealt with – although room for improvement remains.

### Conclusion

Our journey towards a fairer and more reliable assessment model continues. What I have shared above is just one school's journey. There should be useful lessons for any educator or institution seeking to give greater prominence to student-led discussions as a pedagogy.

To date, there has been little discussion in the P4C literature on assessing group discussions in a rigorous manner. Most schools which have infused P4C in their curricula have avoided evaluating the COI discussions directly – since P4C is often deployed instrumentally towards the development of critical thinking, collaborative thinking and other like competencies. Assessment is usually left to performance in other subject-based assessments. However, if we are to take seriously the idea that discussions are authentic demonstrations of students' cognitive, affective and interpersonal abilities, then it is time that we give the question of how to evaluate such discussions more thought.

Assessment for Learning applied to student-led discussions can help both teachers and students understand which skills need reinforcement and help develop the student towards being a more effective discussant. As we seek to cultivate engaged and active global citizens for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, discursive and dialogical skills are areas we cannot afford to neglect.

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