Embodied participation in philosophical practices with children and teenagers: Some reflections

Ileana DASCĂLU, Lecturer and researcher, University of Bucharest, Romania
Anda FOURNEL, Lecturer and researcher, University of Grenoble Alpes, France

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By their very nature, Philosophy for children (P4C) practices integrate experiential learning, considering that philosophical dialogues mirroring democratic practices foster not only the development of reasoning skills, but also self-discovery through a number of problems constructed by the group. In addition, the interactionist perspective present in the model of communities of philosophical inquiry is not limited to intellectual forms, as any kind of dialogue that goes beyond a mere information exchange is conducted on the territory of intersubjectivity: students participate with their personality, cultural resources, habits, bodies and emotions, as well as the contingencies of the environments they have been exposed to.

In this paper we propose a reflection on the embodied participation of young students in philosophy workshops. We will integrate insights from two research directions: the theory of education developed by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, as well as the theory of embodied cognition (Rosch, Varela, Thompson, 1991). Our aim is to explore, both conceptually and methodologically, why and how including the body as an active participant in experiential learning could enrich philosophical practices for and with children and teenagers.

1. The interactionist and experiential approach in education

Experience is a keyword in Dewey's philosophy. Its meaning is often revealed in association with concepts such as: *growth*, *interaction*, *transaction* (organism-environment) applied to the dynamic of internal (individual biology and psychology) and external factors (any form of environment), through which we advance in making sense of the world. Using a terminology anchored in natural sciences, Dewey places the concept of experience in the center of his philosophy of education. The critique of dogmatism in traditional education gains depth by an analysis of arguments and means in favor of revitalizing education, as there can be no genuine education outside experience (Dewey, 1997, p. 25). In addition, any educative experience in a deep sense would need to meet the criteria of continuity and interaction: it should integrate past experiences in order to enrich the student's capacity to participate in future experiences and, equally important, it should indicate a relation between the identity of the student at a given moment and her environment. The two criteria, or the two aspects of experience, longitudinal », i.e. continuity and « lateral », i.e. interaction (Dewey, 1997, p. 44), determine a situated and even embodied approach to education, if we consider the body to be the first barometer of contact with the environment.

Indeed, Dewey had not overlooked this interest in the body in its relation to the world, later developed by phenomenology and, over the past few decades, by the theory of embodied cognition. It is worth mentioning that he referred to the « body-mind » (Dewey, 1929) as an organic unity, mediating our insertion into reality, which is nothing else than the « growth-process itself ». (Dewey, 1929, p. 275)

If the body is indispensable to establishing our relation to the world (that is, we make contact with the world via the body, through our needs and desires, thus discovering our own powers, limits and possibilities), acknowledging its legitimate place in the formation of educational experiences could only enrich learning. Writing about freedom as an element of an educational philosophy based on experience, Dewey used to note that traditional education would systematically discourage students' freedom of movement – strict rules of conduct and the rigid arrangement of the classroom would also curtail students' « intellectual and moral freedom « (Dewey, 1997, p. 61). In fact, students' participation in education was both partial and of a subordinated nature. Far from militating for an interactive education that would do away with the epistemic authority of adults and replace planning with entertainment, Dewey's core criticism was directed against the « non-social character of the traditional school », where silence was a cardinal virtue (Dewey, 1997, p. 63). In addition to the risks generated by a rigid control of the body for the sake of educational discipline – fatigue, ignorance of one's bodily capacities, dissipating one's energy in an unbalanced manner – (Dewey, 2018), an education addressed exclusively to the mind would neglect those practical activities which facilitate a contextualized and personal comprehension of concepts. Consequently, it would be much more useful to get inspiration from environments that are freer and more collaborative, such as the workshop and the laboratory (Dewey, 1997, p. 63).

Dewey's philosophy of education provides, to a great extent, an analytical framework consistent with the commitments and research outcomes of the theory of embodied cognition. Three common points are worth mentioning: the criticism of the « insular nature of thought » (Shapiro, 2007, p. 339), support for an integrative education on various levels, following the model of the gestalt circle – brain-body-environment-social and cultural practices – (Gallagher, 2018), acknowledging the role of direct, physical experience in the acquisition of concepts, especially in science education (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019).

2. Embodied participation in Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for children, developed in the 70s by M. Lipman, A. M. Sharp and colleagues at Montclair State University, has been manifestly inspired by Dewey's views on education. This approach, aiming at a « reflective education « fostering autonomous thinking, ascribes value to the experience of the child, as well as to her imagination and the social practices within which it developed. Lipman agrees to Dewey's view, according to which current experiences are significant to the extent to which they contribute to enrich future ones. In order to learn at school, the child needs to be able to participate in the search for and discovery of meaning, as this is not given and cannot be imparted as such. Such a participation is total, which entails that the child needs to be able to « conceive of, perceive and feel

that he/she is part of the world and that there is a direct relation between his/her action and the quality of existence (hers and others') » [our translation] (Daniel, 1997, p. 55).

The P4C approach advances thus a holistic and embodied view on the process of thinking: thinking is multidimensional, which entails that the development of critical and rational thinking goes hand in hand with that of creative thinking (mobilizing the imagination and spontaneity of the child), as well as with the development of attention (engaging her and others' attention to the thinking process). As emphasized by Kennedy (1999), the experience of a community of inquiry, which lies at the center of philosophical dialogue practices, essentially repositions children and teenagers within the initial circumstances of philosophical practices: "philosophy not just as conversation, but as an emergent, multivocal, and interactive story about the world and about persons thinking about the word" (1999, p. 339).

This « embodied narrative context « represented by the community of inquiry was first exemplified by Lipman's and Sharp's philosophical novels. The purpose of these carefully elaborated narratives was to provide children with ideas on ways of doing, that would add meaning to their experience, enabling then to practice their reasoning and participate in a common inquiry. In addition to the embodied dimension of the context in which participants in the dialogue carry out their research, there is an embodied participation present in the stories themselves, this time related to the characters. Thus, Augustine, a 7-year-old girl blind from birth, the character of the novel *Kio and Augustine* embarks on a discovery of her surrounding world using the perceptive experience coming from within her body, whereas Kio, able to see, could do the same from outside himself. Philosophical reflection takes us to the dichotomy between knowledge by intuition and, respectively, knowledge by the senses, as well as, more generally, to the distinction « internal/external » or « inside/outside ». We see here at play a fundamental pre-conceptual schema that is built and extracted by the experience of the body, allowing the individual to make sense of the world, or, in other words « image-schemas » (Johnson, 1987).

Last but not least, another example of the philosophical material put to use by P4C practices refers to narrative inquiring over « open » concepts, for which no unique answer is to be found, as well as the relations between concepts; consequently, children are invited to reflect together on a topic. The concept of « body » is to be found among these examples. Pixie, the character of the eponymous novel, reflects on whether her numb arm belongs indeed to her body and, thus, invites young readers to inquire for themselves: « Has your arm ever been numb? Isn't it strange? It's like it does not belong to you at all! How could a part of yourself not belong to yourself? You belong to yourself entirely! But, you see, this is what intrigues me. « [our translation] (Lipman, *Pixie*, 1989, chap. 1, p. 9).

3. Embodied participation in philosophical dialogues

We have seen how philosophical novels present children and teenagers engaged in an embodied search for meaning. The body is both one of the concepts to be questioned, and the very modality that makes it possible to engage in the research process (by experiences, perceptions, interactivity,

etc.). Nevertheless, one could inquire how this modelling, provided for in the P4C program works in the practices of philosophical dialogue. In the end, philosophical dialogue practices, irrespective of the medium they use – philosophical novels, literature for youth, tales from world's cultures, photo-language, works of art, etc.- maintain a focus on the community of inquiry. Hence, what forms does embodied participation in philosophical dialogues take?

In order to attempt to answer this question, we refer to two kinds of studies. The first category, briefly mentioned, is interested in methods that would enrich the embodied participation of children and teenagers in philosophical reflections; it proposes new « embodied « models for research in community. The second category, that we wish to elaborate on more, has a different starting point, as it is focused on observing the embodied participations of group members « in action », and more specifically, in dialogues.

3.1. Stimulating embodied participation

Among the studies that build on artistic expression as resources for interactions in a formal educational context (schools), we could first mention García Moriyón's (2017) proposal. By emphasizing the need to further develop creative and attentive thinking, the author suggests that the classroom should be transformed into a « work of art » or at least create the conditions so that each dialogue should be modelled on some form of artistic expression lived by teachers and students alike as a demanding and meaningful educational experience.

The process of inquiry and creative expression that participants in philosophical dialogues are committed to is paralleled, in Santi's research (2017) to jazz improvisation. Originally, improvisation is a form of adaptation of human agency to the environment but, as the author emphasizes, it is also a privileged form of complex and multidimensional thinking. It would allow participants to live the experience of change and meaning of the creation process, as well as to engage in relations characterized by sensitivity to time, the environment, other individuals and creation.

To conclude for this part, we also refer to research carried out by D'Olimpio and Teschers (2017). The authors propose to integrate drama in philosophical dialogues, in order to encourage an imaginative and emotional participation of children and teenagers in the « human » aspects of social interaction. The envisaged embodied model is that of the « art of living », a space favorable to *life-performances* and bodily expressions (*gestures*) incorporated in reflections on life, its norms and values.

3.2. Analyzing embodied participation: methodological aspects

In order to analyze the embodied participation of children or teenagers in the context of philosophical dialogues, researchers can make use of distinct methodologies which, nevertheless, may sometimes prove to be complementary.

The first research tool is the individual interview, generally semi-directed, and conducted after the completion of the dialogue. The technique of the interview is part of a comprehensive logic that gives

priority to the description of the phenomenon, as perceived by the participants. The researcher encourages children and teenagers to verbalize their perceptions related to their own verbal and non-verbal behaviors (or the behaviors of their peers) during the exchange. There are some prerequisites regarding the interviewers: they should be able to describe (« we are sitting in a circle »), assess (« one is rigid on a chair »), and to analyze a posteriori such behaviors (« it would be good to be able to move in the classroom ») (Fournel & al., forthcoming). The data collected, recorded and re-transcribed would then be analyzed and interpreted by the researcher aiming to derive internal intelligibility at discourse level, and then to place this in a perspective by referring to current theories.

When audio-visual data from recorded sessions is available, the researcher carries out a multimodal or embodied analysis (Mondada, 2017). This could focus on action and interaction that bring to the forefront not « solitary individuals, but rather co-participants engaged in a common activity « [our translation] (p. 72). Thus, the researcher takes on the position of the ethnomethodologist and becomes interested in the intelligible nature of the action generated by the group in a specific context (*in situ*). Observations relate to the « multimodal arrangement « combining dimensions such as: verbal speech, gestures, movements, interaction with objects, etc.

To sum up, the two categories of analysis are different and could complement each other to the extent that the observations are focused, in one instance, on how group members refer to their embodied participation after the completion of interactions and, in another instance, on the embodied participation during interaction, i.e. ongoing or in action. In terms of process, we could further distinguish two aspects of embodied participation: an embodied participation in the process of thinking and one in interaction. Analyzing the two aspects allow us to articulate an interest in the embodied trajectory of the participants' thought and an interest in their involvement in practice.

3.3. Some observations regarding embodied participation in the process of thinking

In order to observe what happens in a community of inquiry when young participants gather to reflect together on concepts and conceptual relations, one could pay attention to their verbal discourses and their non-verbal behaviors alike. One could note, for instance, at the level of verbal discourse, the presence of metaphors and image-schemas (a rich or less rich presence, depending on the persons, topics, requests from the facilitators, etc.). Metaphors and image-schemas play an essential part in abstraction and conceptualization, as emphasized by Lakoff and Johnson (1999). Thus, a discussion about the origin of thoughts (where the question explored was: « Where do thoughts come from? ») participants aged from 12 to 14 develop a process of thinking « shaped by the body » (Fournel & Simon, 2021). Here are a few excerpts where we underlined the presence of metaphors and image-schemas mobilized by participants:

> *(211) Ulrick: because:: // for me one can't think but::: one has a bit of an empty shell and sometimes (there) are actions, for example reflexes // one doesn't think one doesn't master them // rather:: this is done on its own*

> *…*

> *(216) Ulrick: for example (there) is a ball that comes towards me I want to catch it however // I didn't say to myself the ball // it::::*

> *(217) Facilitator: it comes towards me mmm*

> *(218) Ulrick: it comes towards me (I) had better bend:: or:: or: move away mmm:: or reach out my hand*

Excerpt 1. « Where do thoughts come from? »

Using the metaphor of an « empty shell », Ulrick mobilizes a pre-conceptual schema that makes possible the comprehension of the world, that is, the « container ». The metaphor allows him to illustrate and at the same time conceptualize the idea of a condition where thoughts are absent. Similarly, in order to describe reflex thoughts, Ulrick uses the image-schema of *path* (« comes ») associated to the *goal* (« towards me »); in order to prevent them, he thinks one should act just like one would act if a ball came towards oneself and one had to avoid it. Here the pre-conceptual schemas invoked are those of movement in space, originating in perceptive experience of the form: down-up (« bend »), left-right (« I move away »), front-back (« reach out my hand »).

> *(222) Arthur: mmm:: I disagree*
>
> *(223) Facilitator: you disagree // couldn't you // then tell him*
>
> *(224) Arthur: //because actually mmm:: when: / when you take a ball // mmm: actually when you think // you must think 'cause actually /actually when mmm:: // now I am thinking and I move my hands {gesture of rotating his two hands lifted} // you know // that's how I think // you know*

Excerpt 2. « Where do thoughts come from? »

In response to Ulrick's words, Arthur expresses his disagreement. Here we could notice the development of argumentative reasoning articulated around disagreement (« disagree … because when you take a ball … you must think ») and of a sentence: the hypothesis according to which we think even when we do gestures. The teenager illustrates this with a bi-modal production: (gesture/verbal speech): « now I am thinking and I move my hands »

The body participates in philosophical reasoning by gestures alike and it is not uncommon for participants in philosophical dialogues to produce and communicate in their exchanges gestural metaphors; this helps them think together. Research carried by Lagrange-Lanaspre (2022) sheds light on the « bi-modal metaphorical *philosophèmes* « (expressed both by gestures and words), thus proving the contribution of gestures to the development of thinking in communities of inquiry.

We are therefore bound to notice that the embodied participation of children and teenagers in school contexts does not ignore Dewey's remark: « For the pupil has a body, and brings it to school along with his mind « (Dewey, 2018, p. 225).

The bodies participate not only in the process of thinking, but also in the space of interaction, allowing for insights into the level of involvement and interest in the dialogue. An analysis of the gestures, gazes, facial expressions, emotions, body posture and orientation in the space, in the interactive context of philosophical practices could be carried out with ethnographic and multimodal approaches (Mondada, 2017). To our knowledge, such studies have already been conducted observing language classes, but not so much so with regard to the practices of philosophical dialogue.

Moving in the classroom is a process with inbuilt limitations, even if sometimes the teachers make use of other premises, such as the gym, in order to organize a workshop allowing participants more freedom of movement to the benefit of the thinking process. It seemed interesting to us to extend our reflection on the perspective of embodied participation integrating other educational environments, such as philosophical experiences in the museums.

4. Experimenting at the museum

The dynamic identity of each participant in the philosophical dialogue indicates specific nuances in each learning situation, that is, in each interaction with the objective conditions of experience.

To this end, we propose a few reflections on the role of museums as educational environments complementing schools, as well as on their potential for experiential and embodied learning in P4C workshops.

For Dewey, the museum, as well as the library and the laboratory, allowed to establish a unity between education and life. Two goals were important: reconstructing the connection between schools and universities, on one hand, and nature and society, on the other; and creating an experiential circuit of acquisition and transfer of knowledge (Dewey, 1900). Despite the stability and prestige it acquired in modernity, the museum, perceived as a resource and a companion to education, has not always elicited the genuine interest and joy of young visitors. Except for those institutions mobilizing pedagogical resources, such as interactive exhibitions, digital guides, do-it-yourself workshops for children and teenagers, museums have been often perceived as spaces of documentation and encounter with a dense, archived and enigmatic past. Contrary to such a view, Dewey considered the museum a natural complement to the school and envisaged its inclusion, whenever possible, within the school premises; in any case, he believed the museum should be seen as a place where the products of experience are organized and analyzed (Hein, 2004, p. 419-420). It was his conviction that the museum does more than preserve objects, in the sense that, with the help of good orientation, it becomes a space rich in information about the activities, ways of adapting to nature and difficulties of social life, as well as about the processes of creation; the museum extends

our world of representations and sometimes serves the cause of social justice, for example, by integrating the aesthetic into the life of workers. His own educational project, *Laboratory School*, included regular visits to museums, as well as trips outdoors at a time where the educational value that such activities might have for children was little acknowledged (Hein, 2012).

To conclude, we suggest an exercise in imagination starting from the experiences of adults having visited the Museum of Romanian Peasant in Bucharest: how would an embodied participation of children and teenagers within a P4C workshop *in situ* look like?

First of all, it is important to mention that the Bucharest Museum of the Romanian Peasant has been committed to engaging the youth in its activities. Fairs are regularly organized, where village artisans exhibit their products; equally, there are creative and interactive workshops: storytelling, drama, painting, sewing, weaving (an opportunity to learn, for example, about the symbols decorating the traditional Romanian blouse), clay sculpting, all with the main goal of transmitting the value of the intangible heritage specific to life in the traditional village in an accessible, pleasant, and absolutely situated and embodied manner.

However, even a visit to the museum where the participants to our imaginary workshops do nothing more than walk and look at the exhibits creates the conditions of possibility for an embodied participation in or by thought, as well as in interaction. This particular museum, radically reorganized after the fall of communism, is, indeed, « a museum against museification », with a language « deliberately conceived of as a language of interpretation […] bringing to light the plurality of possible readings of a phenomenon « (Manolescu, 2006, p. 52 [our translation]). Children can see objects in wood and ceramics, gate pillars, traditional clothing and multicolored eggs decorated for Easter and one could assume this could generate at least some micro-reactions indicative of an embodied participation. One could observe the trajectory of the participants – what they are attracted to, how much time they spend in front of each object, whether their speech or gestures are different from those in school, whether they feel like taking pictures, whether they seem to feel free, curious, tired, bored, whether they want to explore on their own or in group, touching or not the objects. At this particular level one could identify the intensity of their embodied participation (strong or weak) and their « attention in the situation » (Coavoux, 2015 [our translation]).

Secondly, one could assume that such a space inhabited by objects, some of which similar to those that children or teenagers could find at their grandparents' village house, (while to others such objects would not generate any recollection), would allow for some questions to clarify and compare. In the middle of a hall there is a little rural house – it has two rooms, some functional objects, decorations and, to convey the authenticity of the exhibit, some traditional clothes left to dry on the porch. The house was disassembled and reconstructed in the museum by its very owner, a carpenter who created and decorated it himself. It is placed in such a manner that visitors could walk around it, touch the wood, and clearly see the arrangement of the two small rooms; yet, they cannot enter. The natural embodied participation that accompanies the observation process could thus be

supplemented by embodied reflections. One easily notes that the rooms are small and low, meaning that an adult would have to stoop in order to enter. This could mark the starting point of a reflection on freedom and sharing of one's private living space: movements are limited, there is only one room where the entire family sleeps, and one room for cooking and eating. The chairs are tiny just like in fairytales, how could one imagine oneself sitting with one's family at the table? Would a cat or a dog be allowed there? How would one feel if one had to share a room so little with one's parents, as well as siblings? Before or after the visit, children could draw their own room and own house, expressing their own likes and dislikes, thus entering a dialogue with mid 19th century children. They could also choose one object from the village house they are interested in and develop their own artistic discourse. Another point of interest could by the classroom with its fixed rows destined to two-three pupils each. The participants in the P4C workshop could experiment sitting and standing like the village children used to do when the headmaster entered; they could test whether the desks make noise if they move and reflect on the topics of hierarchy and right to speak by comparison with their own experiences.

5. Pathways and future questions

Coming back to Dewey's conceptual framework, an experiential education generates, in the first place, the development or change of habits, not in the sense of routines, but rather of action schemes indicative of one's sensitivity, understanding and capacity to adapt to the environment, thus creating pathways to embodied learning (Thorburn, 2020). Extending the educational environment to include museums is such an example; it could be complemented, as shown in the literature, by increased awareness of one's capacity of self-expression through gestures, drama, aesthetic sensitivity (D'Olimpio & Teschers, 2017). Equally, embodied learning yields fruit on the terrain of science – the examples analyzed by Shaby and Vedder-Weiss (2021) show how a visit to a science museum has the potential to bring to the surface attitudes which are different from those manifested in school, as various opportunities for understanding and change are provided: considering body posture and orientation in the space as signs of engagement with the interaction situation, acting on the environment (moving objects) or on the body (suggest alternative movements to students).

Like any form of education that aspires to be experiential, embodied and situated learning in environments other than the school will meet a challenge which Dewey (1997) had anticipated: the difficulty to maintain a balance between the two criteria of experience, i.e. continuity and interaction. In the case of embodied participation in P4C practices, this challenge speaks of the need to organize educational experiences so that they should not become mere forms of entertainment. Knowledge of students' contexts, their interests, their needs, without imposing interpretations, while ensuring continuity are necessary, so that each experience, including a workshop in a museum, could mature in the body-mind of participants.

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