Why don’t we do it in the street?

SAPERE nurtures the latest in thinking in civil society: Community Philosophy

Author Steve Bramall is chair of the SAPERE Community Philosophy Advisory Group and project manager for the Esmée Fairbairn sponsored SAPERE Community Philosophy Project. Under copyright, published in The Philosophers’ Magazine, Issue 62/3 2013.

In May 2012 the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation began funding a two-year training and research pilot project in Community Philosophy based in the North West of England. The immediate aim of the pilot project was to benefit members of local communities through their participation in community based philosophical dialogue and enquiry groups. The longer term aim of SAPERE is to make Community Philosophy available to community groups across the United Kingdom. The pilot, managed by SAPERE through the Community Philosophy Advisory Group, is now one year in. A good time then to take stock. But first, just what is ‘Community Philosophy’?



Community Philosophy is a movement in which philosophical thinking, reflection and action is engaged in by members of voluntary groups in civil society and, in some cases, by innovative practitioners in statutory bodies. The participants range from older persons engaged in lifelong learning, for example those coming together through organizations like Age UK, to young people working with informal educators in the youth and community sector. Groups include those engaged by newly elected Councillors seeking to understand their role and those in the mental health sector wanting to think through the key concepts of mental well-being. Community Philosophy thrives in non-traditional and non-institutional settings like pubs, where regulars come together to think about what really matters, in housing associations, where officers and tenants enter into philosophical dialogues about issues of importance to them, and in galleries, cafés and libraries where events are held and groups meet for facilitated enquiry and to reflect on meaning and value. Community Philosophy is a philosophy of the people, a redistributed philosophy rooted in the Socratic tradition and powered by the energy of purposeful community engagement.

The movement started through the work of a handful of pioneers of community-based practical philosophy. Amongst these are Michelle Whitworth who brought philosophy to Age UK in the North East, Paul Doran who developed Philosophy in Pubs in Liverpool and Graeme Tiffany who designed, researched and published on innovative Community Philosophy projects in York and Sunderland. From these, and other small beginnings, Community Philosophy has grown to provide spaces, resources and expertise that enable local people to join, form, and sustain their own self-determining, democratic philosophical communities. These groups have helped individuals and communities develop their thinking skills and dispositions, deepen their own thinking and that of others, and explore thinking as a practical tool for engagement in community and cultural life. It’s a movement that has brought people together, given them a chance to access practical, transformational philosophy, develop a thoughtful, purposeful voice, and take pleasure in these collaborative activities. It is steadily increasing its range and ambition and bringing the benefits of practical philosophy to an ever-widening circle. So why, one might ask, is SAPERE getting involved?

SAPERE is the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education, a charity best known for its work in promoting Philosophy for Children (P4C). But, in reality, SAPERE has been involved in developing Community Philosophy over the long haul. The volunteers of SAPERE's Community Philosophy Advisory Group have been working at developing Community Philosophy, in collaboration with community engagement organisers, for the last three years. Most Community Philosophy pioneers are SAPERE trained and developed their approach, in part, through engaging with, and adapting SAPERE's Philosophy for Children model, sometimes radically. This explains why Community Philosophy groups employ so many practices drawn from P4C. A stimulus is sometimes used to provoke thinking and questioning, group members are obliged to support and challenge one another in a Community of Enquiry, philosophical dialogue is facilitated with the aim of exploring and analysing the concepts that emerge, and knowledge and understanding is collectively co-constructed. Like P4C, the ethos of Community Philosophy is one of critical, creative, caring and collaborative participation.

But the model of philosophising developed for Community Philosophy is a hybrid that goes significantly beyond that of P4C. Community Philosophy is influenced as much by the radical intellectual traditions of Paulo Freire and bell hooks as it is by John Dewey and Matthew Lipman. Community Philosophy seeks to problematise accepted wisdoms, engage the disengaged and promote social action. In its pedagogy, Community Philosophy draws on the democratic engagement practices of transformational community work. It seeks out spaces and places in which diversities of people can meet, think and act. It aims to develop the potential for group self-determination through intelligent democracy, invites focus on the local, and is forever on the lookout for opportunities for thoughtful social action. In short, Community Philosophy is political, and it aims to advance a new paradigm in thoughtful political engagement.

Like anything new, the development of Community Philosophy has had its share of teething problems. A limiting factor in its spread has been a shortage of Community Philosophy leaders - people with the skills, knowledge, dispositions and ambition to initiate, organise, and facilitate local groups. The pioneers combined the rigour of academic philosophy with P4C facilitation and community engagement skills. However, this skill set is not common, and until now, not easy to attain.

The SAPERE Community Philosophy project, funded through the generosity of Esmée Fairbairn, aimed to change this. Its objective was to train, coordinate and support Community Philosophy Facilitators so as to bring the benefits of Community Philosophy to a significant number of people and, especially, community members in local groups. The project further sought to employ action research to help develop Community Philosophy training and support structures, methods, materials and organisation, and to help disseminate research findings and expand the reach of Community Philosophy across the country. These are high ambitions. So where are we now the project has been running for one year?



In January this year, sixty four Community Philosophy facilitators were trained in three training groups - one in West Yorkshire, one in Greater Manchester, and one in Merseyside. The training started with intensive two-day courses, modelling reflective practice, examining the key elements of practice, introducing the theory and intellectual traditions, building networks, and developing resources. Support materials were produced, including a handbook, stimulus materials, community-building activities, planning and recording instruments, concept analysis methods, and tools to aid reflection and evaluation.
This two-day training was the start of six months of guided practice and support through which facilitators are now being aided in setting up, managing and sustaining local

Community Philosophy groups. The facilitators are supported through a diversity of means, including visits by local support persons, through social media, practitioner groups, buddying and via thematic peer support networks. It is early days, but already many groups are up and running, some new, some pre-existing groups that have begun using Community Philosophy methods. More are under construction. The reports are encouraging, and in some cases inspiring.

Lawrence Darani writes, "… I have been using Community Enquiry with a lifelong learning group of older people from ages 55- 85. We have looked at Stoicism, Existentialism, Socrates and recently Viktor Frankl exploring the Meaning to Life. I started the group off as memory training workshops as this is an issue which older people are concerned about. The group has gone very well with regular attendees of about 9. I have particularly focused on problematisation and accepted wisdoms through Socratic questioning, which has stimulated their thinking and engendered a respect for differing views. There is a definite bond developing between participants and we meet in the local library where I have asked the librarians to stock some introduction to philosophy books."



Kay Sidebottom reports, "I facilitated a meeting of new local authority Councillors, who were reflecting on the induction programme they had taken part in after election. Unlike the traditional methods we used in six-monthly reviews, the Community Philosophy approach enabled them to think more deeply about their experiences. A question they chose to discuss was: 'How can the council make better use of a Councillor's prior skills and experience?' In previous reviews, discussion had been mainly about the quality of the training courses or IT provision! There is something important about letting people work together to choose the question they are going to ask, and this provoked a deeper and more considered discussion. The group said they really enjoyed and valued the session. I'm planning now to do some Community Philosophy inspired work with voluntary groups in Leeds."

Community Philosophy is a different sort of philosophy. It draws on traditions in academic philosophy, but through its community engagement provides a challenge to the critics who say philosophy is all talk and no action. Rather, Community Philosophy regards talking *as* a form of action. Its practitioners are diverse in their motivations, backgrounds and beliefs, but they are united in conceiving philosophy not as a subject to learn, but as action, as a way for people to engage intellectually and try to change things for the better.

Later this Summer we'll be bringing together facilitators, group members and supporters to share experiences, tell stories, and to generate data, including video for dissemination. Let's hope this is just the beginning, and that in the near future Community Philosophy will be coming to a street near you.

More information about the SAPERE Community Philosophy Project can be found at http://www.sapere.org.uk/Default.aspx?tabid=102
e-mail: lizzylewis@sapere.org.uk Tel: 01865 408 333

Steve Bramall, Community Philosophy Project Manager, can be contacted at
e-mail: stevebramall@sapere.org.uk Mob: 07986077181