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Catherine Hundleby
University of Windsor

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CATHERINE HUNDLEBY
Department of Philosophy
University of Windsor
Windsor, ON
Canada
hundleby@uwindsor.ca

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Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby's stance regarding adversarial reasoning as part of the content of critical thinking education seems to have been misunderstood by some commentators as resisting all adversarial reasoning. Despite that misinterpretation of their position, I support the other criticism by Kat Stevens and Dan Cohen that Bailin and Battersby's model of argument as occurring in a community of inquiry is too idealized.

Bailin and Battersby indicate that critical thinking education should serve students in the epistemological goal of developing reasoned judgment. They note that epistemological goals are considered the point of critical thinking education (hereafter "CT") by many theorists, and for Bailin and Battersby this goal includes both the acquisition of reasoning skills, techniques, or abilities, and the development of personal epistemic virtues or dispositions. The reasoning to be learned and adopted as a habit addresses both "judgments about what to do as well as about what to believe" and so both practical and propositional judgments.

Bailin and Battersby stress that, on their model, arguing is not merely dialogical but dialectical, that views become revised when arguing goes well. Adversarial arguing can obstruct this development, and yet in important ways adversarial functions also propel the process forward. Dialectical progression necessarily involves certain adversarial elements, they indicate, and adversarial functions or practices prove especially effective as debiasing tools, which serves the larger epistemic goals.

On their model, the overarching values are not only epistemological but cooperative. Bailin and Battersby note that "so long as [students] are engaging in a reasoned exchange of arguments, are open to seriously considering alternative arguments, and are willing to follow the reasoning where it leads and to alter their own position accordingly, they are involved in a joint endeavour and are not opponents." This point about treating argumentation epistemologically was developed first – to my knowledge – by Phyllis Rooney who argued at OSSA in 2003 (p. 4) that larger cooperative epistemic goals account for the value of adversarial arguing.

Bailin and Battersby explain that adversarial functions are valuable but subordinate to epistemic goals in responding to criticisms from Stevens and Cohen who treat them as wanting to eliminate all adversarial dimensions from argument. Bailin and Battersby clarify that they agree with Stevens and Cohen who say that "even the virtuous arguer can be justified in adopting some degree of adversariality because of the context of an argument and her role in it" (Stevens & Cohen 2019, p. 2). Such an adversarial activity or "function," in the sense of action rather than teleology, can be consistent with the goal of rational inquiry. Bailin and Battersby merely stress the operation of background epistemic goals.

Stevens and Cohen also criticize the idealism of the Bailin and Battersby model in its dependence on an ideal community of inquiry. The Bailin and Battersby strategy of developing communities of inquiry among students in CT classes enforces the epistemic goals that arguing can serve and prevents the creep of adversarial attitudes that Stevens and Cohen agree pose problems. Perhaps classrooms are one of the very special sorts of environments in which such communities can be developed—research labs and academic conferences might be others. These environments provide an exceptional context for the development of intellectual trust that can be hard to achieve in other environments where knowledge and understanding are not the primary goals and so where eristic argumentation can take over.

The ideal of creating in the classroom a community of inquiry in which membership is guided by adherence to norms of rational inquiry has a distinct beaty and promises to bring out the best in adversarial argument and in theory to support optimal CT education. Yet, I don't find myself working in the conditions that would allow me to provide this for my students and I doubt that this model can be effective in the typical context of CT courses. Size is the particular problem, that is large student-teacher ratios. How can we create such communities within large classes? I have used Bailin and Battersby's textbook and struggled with a class of 90 students because the exercises demanded an individual attention only possible in small classes. Larger classes demand a certain uniformity of presentation and evaluation, even with the help of teaching assistants. It seems to me that the communities of inquiry their exercises foster and their book promotes will each be unique, even within the same classroom; and so evaluating student work requires a lot of individual attention.

Perhaps my frustration results from my lack of skill in educational design but I am also not at all convinced philosophically by Bailin and Battersby's response to Stevens and Cohen that ideals and idealism are good things. I refer them to Charles Mills' famous argument that idealization can exacerbate the problems it aims to address (2005). There are now many philosophers working in "non-ideal theory" because of such concerns and the effectiveness of Bailin and Battersby's ideal in practice remains to be shown.

A non-ideal theorist will ask about on-the-ground problems of sexism and other forms of domination. Consider first the concerns with "feminist non-adversarial argumentation models" elucitated by Tempest Henning (2018) who observes that non-adversarial models of arguing prove inadequate for African-American women's speech communities in which adversarial engagement plays an intrinsic role in bonding and social identity. Also, feminists need models of argument that help them negotiate purely political arguments where the development of reason is subordinate to resolving conflict. Bailin and Battersby's idealized community of inquiry is supposed to substitute for the real world of strife. The question still remains how to "get there from here" in any but exceptional circumstances, circumstances that may only seem achievable from a perspective of privilege, whether that be race, gender, and class privilege or the privilege of small class sizes.

So, certain questions remain: Does setting up the classroom as an ideal community of inquiry serve well the needs of women and minority students? Perhaps it provides a refreshing change? Perhaps instead it is so divorced from student lives that it alienates students and turns them away from the study of argument? We need non-ideal theory to address such questions.

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