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Reflection Paper 1
THE COFFEE MUG MODEL

In past journal entries I have argued that at their core all learning environments are communities first and classrooms second. The culture of the community functions as a support structure which contains and promotes the values espoused by the community. In this paper, I want to build on that insight, and introduce a concept from dialogue known, aptly enough, as the *container*. I believe that the container is an ideal foundational structure for classroom instruction. Before that, though, I want further to explore the idea of behavior as a space. At that time I will be in a position to situate the container in a larger theory of learning, my *coffee mug model*.

Let's pretend that you ask me where our mutual friend Minerva is. It's likely that you'd accept "on a date" as an answer even though there is no physical place—at least to my knowledge—called a date. Dates, like so many other examples from everyday life, represent a class of places that are not confined to any, particular physical space. It is true that dates do take place, at least partially, in physical reality. However, places such as these, which I call *behavior spaces*, actually comprise two key components: the *physical space*, which is most obvious to the observer, and, more importantly, a characteristic set of actions, or *behavior*, which define the context of the space.

Given that behavior and use contributes to our conception of a physical space, we can make sense of lots of English idioms that otherwise appear to be illusions of language. People can justifiably be down on the dumps, feel left behind, or be in ecstasy. It is natural that the language of location should appear in the rhetoric of action or feeling. Courts, business conventions, and classrooms transcend the physical spaces that host them. Indeed, most gatherings are characterized by the interactions among the participants—not with the space itself. Home is where the heart is; California is just a state of mind.

In education, the primary, underlying structure is the classroom. Effective designs should enable and facilitate learning. Aside from content knowledge—e.g., Latin, or the visual arts—classrooms, by their communal nature, transmit a set of values. These values can be broad in scope, such as the practice of imaginative play or an aversion to risk-taking, or specific and narrow; such as, the bell at the start of class signals quiet. No matter the specific content of these values, they are all examples that constitute a long conversation of action. The term conversation is justified because *all actions communicate information*.

To see what I mean, allow me to reuse an example I brought up in class. In early childcare and development, the literature differentiates between discipline and punishment. Discipline is meant to alter an unwanted behavior whereas punishment merely and temporarily stops it. Consider two children, Castor and Pollux, each vying for the same toy during play. Further imagine that, frustrated that his playmate took complete charge over the toy, Castor hits Pollux. In their play environment, hitting—and physical violence more generally—is viewed as unacceptable and must be treated accordingly. Accordingly, however, is the keyword.

In an environment which approaches the situation using punishment, a figure of authority will at the very least intervene, and save Pollux from immediate, continued strikes. Castor's punishment may also include one or more retributive strikes à la Hammurabi or a forced though undirected time out for reflection. However, if we wish to keep the distinction between discipline sharp, the punishment, whatever it may be, should not include practices that encourage self-reflection or other forms of learning, such as an undirected and unsupervised time-out.

Discipline, by contrast, targets behavior modification. True to its Latin roots, discipline is a form of chastisement that aims to teach—to offer something for its recipient to “take away.” Some early childhood theorists therefore suggest focusing on the victim. In our story, our authority figure would turn to Pollux and ask him how being hit makes him feel. The response is meant to impart empathy to his aggressor. We can take the discipline further by having Castor fetch and present ice or other emollient to Pollux. Through these actions, the authority figure conveys a lesson: hitting is not an acceptable substitute for verbal communication because of the precise way it makes others feel¹.

The distinction between halting punishment and instructive discipline is not nearly so neat. Both methods recognize a grammar of actions; the difference, then, is that the tenets of discipline do so explicitly. Actions and reactions form a conversation, of which verbal communication is only a part. It has been said that as much as 90% of communication is non-verbal. Body language and the like aside, situational context and cultural mores mandate proper forms of behavior. To wit, punishment teaches every bit as much as discipline. What it teaches, however, is different. Let's reevaluate the sequence of events:

Context	Castor and Pollux want and reach for the same toy; Pollux gets there first. Castor is frustrated by his unsuccessful attempt to satisfy his internal desires.
Action	To communicate his feelings to himself and others, Castor repeatedly hits Pollux.
Reaction	An authority figure, say a teacher, intervenes and answers Castor's hitting with physical restraint in order to stop his hitting Pollux.

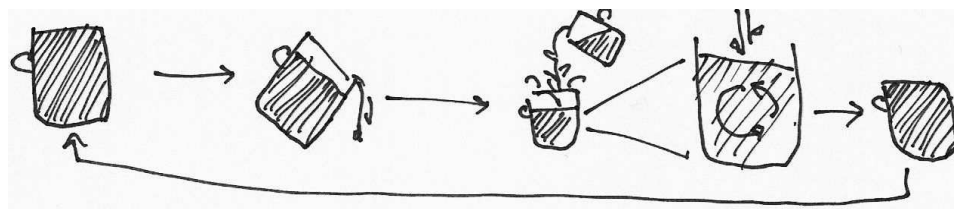
Subsequent instances of the action-reaction conversation above demonstrate to Castor that hitting receives attention from an authority figure. The conversation may not directly resolve Castor's problem, and it's likely that he knows the consequences if he continues his behavior. But that's precisely the point: Castor will come to understand the conversation of hitting. He will be able to use the hitting dialogue as a piece in larger and more complicated conversations of action in exactly the same way that I use words and small phrases to convey a complex argument. Instead of addressing the real problem, a matter of communication, punishment simply engages in a less than useful conversation.

As educators, and more as members of society, we should actively consider which sort of behaviors we want to use to structure our conversations. These behaviors will reflect a choice in values. I believe that the single most important classroom value is respect. In this (and most situations), *respect is the willingness to learn from another*. Usually the other mentioned in the definition is another person, though it need not be. It makes sense to extend the definition to include other living creatures, institutions (like law), or other fully abstracted concepts (like roles within

¹Certainly there are other ways to handle the situation.

an institution). Respecting one's feelings, then, means to learn from them. This is a pretty demanding definition, as it presumes many other components normally associated with respect and more. In this framework it is not enough to acknowledge or even tolerate conflicting viewpoints. This definition requires an openness that assumes learning. That is not to say that learning necessitates adoption, or even acceptance, of conflicting points of view. Pollux can learn from Castor why someone might hit another person when he is frustrated. He can then use that insight to inform his approach to different situations later on. I am by no means suggesting that Pollux mimic Castor's behavior.

Respect forms part of the basic *container* of the classroom behavior space. It is useful to include of actions such as critical awareness of personal assumptions. Additionally, we might value explaining one's reasoning—which helps to expose personal assumptions. There are more, but the point of this paper is not give explicit directives for effective classroom design. Instead, I want to describe the general form for a class effective classroom designs will take. I call the following, general form the *Coffee Mug Model* of learning.



In this model, a coffee mug represents each participant in the learning community—including the teacher. To start, each mug is almost entirely full. The contents signify the pre-existing knowledge, cultural biases, superstitions, and the like, that individuals bring with them to the classroom. The container itself is a behavior space. As such it structures the presentation of the contents and mediates what each individual can and cannot accept. Here we realize how crucially values interact with input sensory data. On its own, any single datum is without meaning until it has been accepted and processed within the container.

The mug representation of student esteems the knowledge that students have themselves. It respects their values (both in my and the general sense of the word). It creates a setting which encourages mutual teaching and learning. In short, it exploits the community structure in to build a *student-centered* learning environment.

Once in the classroom, students share their information through any diverse forms, metaphorically pouring out. On the one side, this process makes room for new ideas. At the same time, it provides an effective data collection strategy.

This model exploits any asymmetry of ignorance within the group. Participants bring together potentially non-overlapping points of view supported by their experiences, and then present them to the group. As active learners, members need only to listen to each other, compare, and synthesize the information offered before them. Sense-making is done both during private reflection and in public sharings. The instructor guides the discussion to make sure that it is content-relevant, thus ensuring that the learning environment is necessarily *knowledge-centered*.

Because participants constantly expose their thinking, instructors gain a better sense of what each member of the community understands than is possible through

isolated, conventional assessment methods. The classroom itself is a continuous, living formative assessment. Perpetual acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and skill and revision thereof appear as natural side-effects of the coffee mug model. Behaviors generally thought to be useful for learners, such as intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and risk-taking, show themselves in the coffee mug model members because the structure allows and encourages them.

To put the model in practice is not a simple feat. Cultural change do not occur overnight.² Its approach relies on developing a culture within a community of perhaps very dissimilar points of view. I predict that instilling sustained, unanimous, pair-wise respect—which is the most vital part—will also be the hardest part to achieve. I have not given any express suggestions that would lead to an immediate implementation of my model. This is, in part, because each community, like each student, already carries with it a culture. To ignore the community-centered component of classroom design, even to replace it with another community base, is irresponsible. The coffee mug model should build on top of existing culture, not displace it. Over time, it is my hope that the coffee mug model will sink deep into the existing culture until the two are no longer distinguishable. At that time, learning will really have made it out of the physical classroom into everyday life. And as we have seen before, everyday life is nothing more than another behavior space. We might as well make it a classroom.

²Most cultural changes take place over a long period of time because of the time constraints imposed on culture by tradition. Cf. Entry 2.