# Philosothons: Rewarding collaborative thinking

Danielle Diver

University of Birmingham

dbd968@student.bham.ac.uk

## Abstract

Competition, and its effect on educational environments, has been widely debated. On the one hand, it is argued that competition raises attainment and, on the other, it is said that whilst it may raise attainment for some, it exists at the expense of a supportive school environment. Should philosophy undertaken as a subject in schools, such as P4C, involve any level of competition if there is a chance of it raising performance? Scholars have argued that communities of inquiry within P4C conflict with the notion of competition, using competition as a contrast to cooperation, as competition implies that only certain voices will be heard and, without it, participation is more welcome and inclusive. Perhaps there is already too much competition in schools, in which case philosophy should be the one place students need not worry about competing with their peers and instead focus purely on collaboration. But what if the very skills that competition undermines are rewarded in a competition? While it stands that competition can silence particular voices and conflict with cooperation, I will argue that competition can avoid these outcomes and improve philosophical performance if such competition rewards collaboration and inquiry, therefore encouraging it.

## Key words

Community of Inquiry, competition, cooperation, education, P4C, Philosothon

## Introduction

It has been said that there is no place for competition in philosophy, especially in a Community of Inquiry context (Daniel 2007; Fletcher 2020; Lipman 2003; Lipman et al. 1980; Sharp & Splitter 1995). This idea rests on the assumption that competition and cooperation cannot coexist. However, if a competition rewards collaboration, does this alleviate the worry that competition and cooperation conflict? If so, does this mean that the value of competition, whether it contributes to positive or negative consequences, depends on what is being rewarded? In this paper, I aim to show that

the assumption that competition and cooperation conflict is unfounded and therefore we must evaluate other reasons that philosophy and competition ought not to be connected.

In the first section, I will begin by examining the definition of competition in order to come to a working definition suitable for this paper. I will then discuss the effect competition has in an educational setting and ask whether philosophy is an inherently competitive activity or not, and if so, what type of competition is involved. I will show that philosophy may involve a degree of intrinsic informal competition and argue that, unless in small doses, this may get in the way of good philosophical dialogue. I will then return to the idea that the consequences of competition depend on what skills and qualities are being rewarded. Having established that some competitions do not reward very much (such as those purely based on chance, and those informal competitions that underlie social relationships), it might be considered that competitions which reward desirable skills and qualities have better outcomes in terms of personal development than those that simply reward luck or spending money. Philosothons, which are formal philosophy competitions based on the Community of Inquiry methodology, reward collaboration and therefore one might think that philosophy competitions have good consequences in that they encourage participants to be more collaborative in the future. However, in much of the Philosophy for Children literature, it is assumed that competition and cooperation cannot coexist, and so Philosothons would contradict the aims of the Community of Inquiry. I hope to prove that the very existence of Philosothons, as well as the nature of competition itself, undermines this claim.

**A working definition of competition**

A competition typically involves a scenario in which teams or individuals compete against each other, each with a common goal in mind. These goals can range from winning the most points, getting the most questions correct, earning a prize of some sort, whether it is money, a trophy or simply the satisfaction of winning. When one team or individual wins, it is safe to assume that the competing team or individual does not win and therefore loses. Dearden (1972) defines competition as follows:

> For A and B to actually be in competition for X, then A and B must both
> want X, A's getting it must exclude B from having it, and they must both

persist in trying to get it even if they know that one's getting it must exclude the other. (p. 121)[1]

It is this structure of 'winners and losers' which implies that some quality or skill is rewarded for surpassing the efforts of others. In a sporting competition, it is sporting prowess that is rewarded, as well as dedication, teamwork and overall fitness. In a quiz, it is propositional knowledge that is rewarded. Despite the winners being rewarded for their performance in some capacity, every competition will typically involve an element of chance. In the case of sport, it depends on the condition of the players on the day of the competition, whether players are unwell or injured, as well as how skilled the opposing team are. In the quiz example, there is an element of chance in which topics and questions arise. No matter how clever a competitor is, they cannot know everything and so, if an unfamiliar topic arises, they will be less likely to win.

On the other hand, some competitions do not reward very much at all and are purely based on chance, such as a lottery, or TV competitions which ask easy questions to encourage lots of people to take part in order to collect as many phone-call fees as possible. Competitions purely based on chance do not obviously encourage the development of any skills since none are rewarded and so it is less likely that any self-improvement will occur from taking part in competitions such as these. Positive consequences may arise, such as the lottery raising money for charity and funding creative projects, but any positive effect on the individual participants in terms of developing skills from merely taking part in the competition are unclear.

Whilst Dearden's definition of competition is a good starting point, I acknowledge that competition is a complex term and can exist in a broader sense. Competition can occur in many contexts beyond games and sports, it exists between institutions, brands and, of course, can manifest in relationships between friends, colleagues, neighbours and so on. Perhaps a distinction can be drawn between what might be referred to as *formal* and *informal* competition, in order to account for at least some of the different contexts in which competition can arise. Competition in a game or sport setting could be considered a form of *formal* competition. In a formal competition, the rules and obstacles are pre-established, as well as the reward for adhering to said rules and overcoming said obstacles. This more-or-less guarantees that participants are

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[1] Dearden (1972) does not explicitly account for a competition that results in a draw, but he does implicitly allow for this possibility since the object of competition need only be 'capable of being exclusively possessed, whether by its very nature or by virtue of some rule or convention' (p. 123).

aware that they are in competition. *Informal* competition typically does not have a formal set of rules or rewards and is likely to arise in social relationships, for example. In such an instance, it is not always guaranteed that all parties are aware of the existence of an informal competition, such as neighbours unknowingly competing for the best extension to their house, or school friends who are competing to get better test scores than each other. In the case of the school friends and the neighbours, the competition may exist in the mind of one party, or both, and yet they may never express it verbally to each another. It is of course possible that the neighbours could establish rules and a reward for who has the best extension, and vice versa with the school friends, but this would no longer be informal.

It seems clear which qualities are being rewarded in a formal competition, since it may involve a performance of some set of skills or qualities, but it is less clear which qualities informal competition rewards. Of course, it is entirely possible to have a formal competition that does not reward a particular set of skills and qualities, where the results are purely based on chance, for example. Formal competition is based on pre-established rules that the participants are aware of. With no pre-established rules, informal competition tends to manifest as underlying competition between peers. It will be less clear what participant characteristics are being rewarded, or what the reward actually is. In informal competition, the reward may purely be self-satisfaction, which is unlikely to be a positive outcome for the social relationship, especially if the other party finds out that there was a surreptitious competition between them. It seems important then, to be aware of the conditions of a competition, in order to be clear on what skills or attitudes a competition rewards. This is especially important in the context of education where competition is often utilised as a motivational tool, based on the assumption that whatever skills a competition rewards will likely be encouraged in the future.[2]

There are further complexities which arise, which ought to be acknowledged before continuing. One such occurrence which Dearden's definition does not quite account for is that success is subjective, in that winning might not just involve exclusively possessing some prize. There are many goods which one can gain from taking part in a competition, for example, beating a previous record despite losing to the opposing team for example. This may be perceived as winning to some competitors despite

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[2] It is worth mentioning that one does not have to literally be rewarded in order for such skills to be developed. The potential reward for displaying a particular set of skills and qualities is usually enough for the competitor to cultivate them for the sake of competing. So long as they are positive skills and qualities it is hoped that the skills will manifest outside of competition too.

'losing' in the official sense. Winning could even take the form of simply the enjoyment of taking part, further developing some skill, or cementing friendships. It is also worth mentioning what motivates one to be competitive or engage in a competition. In competitions purely based on chance, it might just be money. In an educational environment, however, it could be gaining teacher or parent approval; receiving a confidence boost in one's own abilities; impressing peers; receiving praise; or besting peers for some feeling of superiority.

I have discussed competition here for the sake of clarity and to draw attention to the idea that the purpose of competition, as a short-term goal, is rewarding skills and behaviours in order to achieve the long-term goal of cultivating those skills in the future. The focus of this paper is to evaluate the suitability of competition in a philosophy for children (P4C) setting, specifically in the Community of Inquiry (CoI). Discussing competition in terms of formal and informal may also help to identify what type of competition, if any, philosophy and CoI involves and therefore what the consequences might be.

**Competition in education**

Since the context of this paper concerns P4C, I will spend some time considering some worries about competition in education. It is important to first bear in mind that competition is not always presumed to be a negative thing. As mentioned, competition is often used as an educational tool. It can be used to reinforce good behaviour; increase performance and motivation; and encourages participation by offering rewards. When there is a common goal, competition is likely to improve team working skills. However, constant competition that aims to determine who's the fastest, who's the cleverest or who's the strongest, can easily leave people feeling substandard. Those who do not win are assumed to be subpar in some sense, they are not recognised as the best and therefore may be labelled as a 'loser' by their peers or others. On this basis, one can see how it might be plausible for competition to negatively affect personal relationships.

Damian Cox argues strongly against competition in education. He specifically takes issue with what he refers to as 'rank competition', which is competition that seeks to rank people from best to worst (Cox 2019) and pit people against each other. The prime example he gives is graded education. Cox's main problem with rank competition is that it conflicts with egalitarian ideals and undermines equality. There is nothing truly of value when it comes to rank competition, other than beating others and this itself is merely circumstantial. Cox thinks that competition ought to be

abolished in education, to such an extent that there should be no grading, but instead, a challenging set of 'pass or fail' tests to ensure that those who qualify are 'competent', but that no one is better than anyone else (Cox 2019). This idea has the best of intentions, but in today's climate, it is not very practical. I believe Cox is aware of this, however, since he notes his discontentment with today's 'hypercompetitive society' and that his suggestion may only be suitable in egalitarian societies (Cox 2019).

Needless to say, the egalitarian ideal itself is not entirely realistic, since true equality is not possible nor necessarily desirable. Wilson (1989) states that egalitarianism presumes that the only 'respectable relationship between human beings is one of equality' (p. 28). Of course, there are many examples of relationships which are respectful, but which are not always grounded in absolute equality. For example, a relationship in which there are differing power dynamics in a professional situation, whilst not entirely equal, is not necessarily devoid of respect. I know, for example, that I am not equal to my university supervisors. I am equal in the sense that I deserve the same human rights, but professionally, I do not have the same level of experience or expertise. If we were equals, professionally, then it would be unlikely that I would learn anything and so, it is more beneficial to learn from someone with more expertise.

One of the issues that often crops up in favour of competition in education is that it better prepares students for the real world, in which competition exists just about everywhere and this is unlikely to change anytime soon (Wilson 1989):

> Competition in a broad sense is inevitable for anyone who wants to
> perform well at anything, since the notion of performing well is relative to
> other performers, all of whom are out to satisfy certain standards. (p. 28)

Democracy itself is rooted in competition as politicians compete for our votes; applying for jobs involves competing with other applicants; opening a business involves competing with other businesses for customers and much more. Whilst it is understandable why teachers and parents might feel protective of their children against the negative connotations of competition, it is not entirely helpful for preparing them for the future (Wilson 1989).

**Is philosophy competitive?**

If we are to determine whether competition ought to be a part of philosophical practice, specifically in the context of P4C, we first need to determine whether or not competition is an inherent part of philosophical practice. Some arguments claim that

philosophy is not a competitive activity and additionally, that philosophy should not involve competitive elements (Daniel 2007; Fletcher 2020; Lipman 2003; Lipman et al. 1980; Sharp & Splitter 1995;) whilst other arguments claim that competition is an inherent part of philosophical discussion (Worley 2021). Worley justifies this claim by appealing to the fact that during philosophical discussions, one is trying to support their own claim with the best reasons, and this is based on the assumption that those reasons will be better than any other reasons given.

Whilst philosophy is not explicitly competitive, it could be argued that informal competition plays a role in philosophical practice, since participants in a philosophical discussion may subconsciously or consciously compete with their peers to appear smarter or more nuanced in their contributions. This type of underlying competition may cause problems, for, if philosophy is too embroiled in competition, then the aim of making good valid arguments that are focused on getting closer to the truth instead becomes the goal of simply winning arguments and besting one's opponent. While it is a goal in a sense to win an argument; one strives to provide reasons for some proposition that are sufficient enough to be accepted. The aim is to strengthen the argument for the sake of improving the argument itself and thus get closer to a justifiable claim. But if the only goal is winning an argument or trumping someone else's arguments, this may lead to poor reasoning or more instances of biting the bullet which is not always necessary; or even relying on fallacies to throw the opponent off. In instances like these, one may only appear to win an argument. But to truly win an argument, one must appeal to the best reasons possible in such a way that no adequate counterexample can be given to undermine said reasons. Therefore, if philosophy does involve competition in some sense, we need to be clear about what it means to win an argument in a philosophical discussion and what the aim of philosophy is. If the aim is truth, then competition might provide a motivating force to see who can get to the truth first. However, truth itself would not meet Dearden's (1972) conditions for an object of competition, since truth cannot be exclusively possessed by one person. My having the truth would not exclude someone else from attaining the truth; therefore, it cannot be competed for. Likewise educational goods cannot and should not be the object of competition, since education is infinitely shareable (Dearden 1972). Competition in philosophy then, predominantly exists in an informal sense, since there can certainly be competitive undertones in philosophical discussion, but there are no preestablished rules or prizes.

Perhaps age may play a significant role in how much competition is or ought to be involved in philosophical dialogue. Initially it may seem that in an academic

environment, there is far more room for competition: competition for promotions, competition to have one's paper accepted to a journal, as well as in the philosophical dialogue itself. However, philosophical dialogue in an academic setting and a school setting may not be so dissimilar in its aims, in that both age groups are trying to get closer to the truth and win the approval of their peers and academic superiors. In an academic setting, there are likely to be more professional undertones, but these are merely practical considerations. In a conference, for example, participants may compete to look the most informed in order to be noticed by potential future employers; whilst school pupils in a CoI, who may not be aiming to win a job promotion, may compete with their peers for their teacher's approval and admiration.

As mentioned, philosophy may well involve informal competition, since participants in a philosophical discussion may subconsciously or consciously compete with their peers to appear smarter or more nuanced in their contributions. A Philosothon, however, plausibly involves formal competition. A Philosothon is a philosophy competition where students compete to be the most collaborative, critical, and caring and creative individual whilst engaging in philosophical questions using the CoI model of discussion. This involves students sitting in a circle and engaging with a stimulus pre-agreed by the organisers (usually a story with philosophical undertones, alongside some explicitly philosophical questions that can be used to anchor the discussion). The students are typically familiar with the stimulus in advance and the Philosothon gives them the opportunity to display the kind dialogical skills associated with CoI. Competition in a Philosothon exists as a specific set of rules, where all parties are aware of the competition and individuals earn points according to a specific marking criterion; therefore, the kinds of skills that are rewarded are clear.

There may be a distinction to be drawn between how competition functions implicitly in the classroom CoI and how competition functions in the Philosothon CoI, where the presence of competition is more explicit. It may be that classroom CoI involves informal competition in the form of underlying competition between peers to appear clever and win approval; whilst a Philosothon is more formally competitive in that external judges evaluate the performance of the students in how well they execute CoI methods and select a winner based on whichever individual performs the best. Since the Philosothon is grounded in CoI methodology, it would potentially involve both informal competition and formal competition. One may encounter difficulty in trying to avoid informal competition because it is not always easy to detect, but one can certainly avoid formal competition.

In the next sections, I will evaluate the negative connotations of competition in the context of the Community of Inquiry in an attempt to determine whether those arguments against competition in P4C have any standing. To respond to the claim that competition and cooperation conflict I will first show that most competitions cannot function without cooperation and then show that the value of competition can be determined by what is being rewarded. If we can plausibly assume that competition encourages the behaviours it rewards and provide an example of a competition that rewards cooperation, then cooperation will therefore be encouraged. Both claims undermine the worry that competition and cooperation conflict in the context of P4C and the CoI.

**Community of Inquiry**

In the context of P4C, it is often said that competition and cooperation conflict. Since the CoI pedagogy can be epitomised by its collaborative nature, then it follows that competition and CoI conflict. However, this assumption relies on the supposition that competition and cooperation are opposites and that they cannot coexist. In this section, I will present what the advocates of P4C have to say regarding competition in P4C in order to show how pervasive this claim is and the lack of justification for such a claim.

Discussions regarding the CoI highlight the collaborative nature of dialogue in P4C; it is one of the four Cs in P4C pedagogy: critical, caring, creative and collaborative thinking. As such, there is a strong emphasis on collaboration and cooperation as a primary aim of P4C and it would seem there is no room for competition. 'Through inquiry, individuals with distinct skill-sets come to understand that cooperation is a far more efficient path to new knowledge than competition' (Fletcher 2020, p. 65). Similarly, Sharp and Splitter assert that:

> As with the community of inquiry, co-operative learning assumes that for younger children, at least, the most valuable learning occurs in an environment based on collaborative peer interaction rather than on individualism and competition. (Sharp & Splitter, 1995)

What each of these perspectives has in common is that it is presumed that competition and co-operation are opposites, yet there is no further discussion as to why competition is devoid of cooperation and this lacuna allows for considerable scrutiny. Lipman, on the other hand, attempts to provide slightly more detail, in that he thinks

competition compromises a learning environment comprised of friendship and cooperation.

> Having education revolve around inquiry requires that the classroom be
> converted into a community in which friendship and cooperation would
> be welcomed as positive contributions to a learning atmosphere, rather
> than be the semi-adversarial and competitive conditions that prevail in
> too many early childhood classrooms. (Lipman 2003, p. 94)

Lipman's statement presumes that competition in CoI implies that friendship and cooperation conflict with competition. Whilst it is the case that competition which results in or aims at spreading envy or making others angry ought to be avoided, competition need not be invidious or semi-adversarial. Competition can be friendly, informal and fun in a lot of cases. Similarly, Daniel does not think that there is a place for competition in philosophical dialogue, specifically among peers in a CoI setting. The goal of philosophical collaborative discussion,

> … is not to lead the children to argue for the sake of competition, but rather
> to lead them to dialogue in a perspective of cooperation; each individual
> intervention thus contributes to enriching the group's perspective. (Daniel
> 2007, p. 139)

Daniel alludes to a report made by the International Commission to UNESCO that states the importance of developing critical thinking in pupils. Daniel responds to this call by making the case that P4C aims to develop critical thinking skills and that implementing dialogical inquiry into schools would satisfy the aim of developing critical thinking skills. From the very outset, however, the assumption is again made that competition and cooperation conflict.

> Furthermore, the Commission strongly suggests that cooperation among
> youngsters be valued, thus making it known that critical thinking should
> not be taught as a competitive rhetoric, but rather as a means to grow with
> the help of peers. (Daniel 2007, p. 135)

On the other hand, Lipman et al. (1980) also says, 'It is helpful for children to challenge each other's ideas. Partly it is done out of playfulness; partly it is done out of competitiveness or contentiousness' (p. 73). In this instance, it seems that Lipman is abandoning his negative preconceptions about competition in the CoI. And so, there

seems to be a lack of consistency in exactly where competition stands in relation to the CoI.

If there are cases where competition and cooperation coexist in philosophy, P4C and CoI specifically, then this will support the claim that there is no reason to presume that they are opposites or that they conflict in some way. If they do not conflict, then the reasons to exclude competition from philosophy become less clear.

**Competition and cooperation**

Initially, it may seem that competition and cooperation cannot coexist since, in a competitive environment, such as competition for a better position at work, only one person can get the position. Co-workers applying for the position are unlikely to help each other achieve the goal that they want for themselves (unless, of course, there is a particularly charitable worker). However, in academic fields, co-workers will often compete for the same grants or positions but cooperate in the sense that they do so to increase their chances of furthering the field. In this example, perhaps the academics value something above and beyond themselves.

Nguyen (2017) asserts that competition and cooperation are not mutually exclusive in the way that P4C practitioners and advocates presume. One can cooperate without necessarily competing, but it seems one cannot compete without cooperation in some sense: whether as a team or simply cooperation with a pre-established set of rules in order for the competition to exist and function. Nguyen refers to this as 'striving play' in a game setting, where one adheres to a set of rules and unnecessary limitations in order for the game to exist. These limitations create a challenge between participants, typically resulting in a winner(s) and a loser(s). Without agreeing to engage with the limitations, the competition could not exist. Dearden would agree that competition and cooperation are interconnected in the sense that competition requires cooperation to function well: 'Competition, whatever one may think of it, does require co-operative observance of its own shared ethic in all cases short of total ruthlessness' (Dearden 1972, p. 122). If by total ruthlessness, Dearden means cheating, then this would involve not cooperating with the rules or the shared ethic of the game. However, one still cooperates by agreeing to play the game, but the competition itself is compromised since the participants are no longer competing fairly since, by cheating, winning is no longer available to parties who are playing by the rules. Perhaps one can say that competing and 'not cheating' is another form of cooperation. Plus, it seems implausible that cheating is intrinsic to competing, so the chance of cheating does not make competition itself any less of a cooperative activity, but the

lack of cheating in a competition (when one could cheat), itself, is another form of cooperation that occurs in a competition.

If philosophy is to be done properly and with the goal of getting closer to the truth, participants should not solely aim at winning arguments. In fact, by having flaws pointed out in one's argument, one actually gets closer to the truth and so, again, it depends on the definition of winning in this scenario. However, like Nguyen's account, if one presents a philosophical perspective that is met with no resistance or challenges, then this would make for a rather dull discussion; or no discussion at all. The point of striving play and competition in a game setting is that there ought to be a degree of challenge to make it worthwhile.

> Here is a strange truth about many competitive games: often, I must try quite hard to beat my opponent for them to have a good time. Such games have a complex and seemingly paradoxical structure: they are both competitive and cooperative, and the competitive element is required for the cooperative element to work out. We might even call them a social technology, capable of converting aggression into a social benefit and perhaps even a moral good. (Nguyen 2017, p. 123)

Similarly, referring to philosophy, Wilson notes that competition needn't always be negative, competition is fun in many cases —Wilson provides an example in which his paper is criticised by another philosopher. Initially, he felt embarrassed, undermined and peeved, but:

> Later I came not only to realise the ultimate irrelevance of triumph and disaster when doing philosophy (since only the truth really matters), but actually to appreciate and enjoy the way in which this demolition job was carried out: just as it is possible to enjoy being thoroughly crushed on the chess-board by an expert. (Wilson 1989, p. 29)

This would not be a suitable way to respond to children, of course; to demolish their work or efforts would be detrimental to their self-esteem and future development. It may crush their spirit and cause them to not want to try again. However, was what Wilson experienced really a 'demolition job', or did it just feel that way because he had been so certain that his paper contained no flaws? This is entirely plausible since, earlier, Wilson writes that the writer who criticised his work, 'did this in the nicest possible way; but of course, at the time, I felt embarrassed, ashamed and a bit angry' (Wilson 1989, p. 29). Wilson also goes on to say that it is important to be exposed to

this sort of occurrence, for 'the dignity receives a temporary wound, but flourishes all the more for being able to face and overcome it' (Wilson 1989, p. 29).

Overall, then, it would seem that competition and cooperation do not conflict, since competition cannot function without cooperation. However, just because competition and cooperation do coexist, does not mean necessarily that competition is a good thing to have in philosophy or that competition is appropriate for the CoI pedagogy. CoI aims to create an open and welcoming environment where students work together to build on each other's ideas rather than trying to win anything. A Philosothon, then, could be seen to undermine the aims of the CoI, and this might lead one to question whether a Philosothon really counts as CoI. I attempt to shed some light on these considerations as I now turn to Philosothons and examine how competition functions within them and try to determine whether competition serves to undermine the CoI or to motivate the inculcation of its values.

**Philosothons: Rewarding collaborative thinking**

If competition and cooperation have been argued to oppose one another, and in turn, the philosophical CoI is said to favour cooperation over competition, would turning the CoI into a competitive venture undermine its positive effects? In this section, I will first explore the background of Philosothons and then propose that the existence of a Philosothon is proof that competition and cooperation can coexist in the context of the CoI without undermining its aims. Additionally, the presence of formal competition functions to encourage the development of philosophical dialogical skills.

Philosothons were first established in 2007 by Matthew Wills whilst teaching at Hale School in Perth, Australia and due to their success, subsequently spread across the world. Turning philosophy into a competitive venture seemed like a natural step for Wills, who observed the competitive nature of just about every aspect of the student's life at the school[3]. His aim was to raise the profile of philosophy and to promote P4C pedagogy, which until then, had not been widely utilised in schools. Although Wills was not explicitly aiming to increase engagement with philosophy at Hale School, which already had a lunchtime Philosophy Club, he left a legacy of a thriving philosophy department with over 120 students opting to enrol in the subject. The

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[3] A special thank you to Matthew Wills, who provided this information via email correspondence, as to how and why he created the Philosothon. Response received 24 October 2021.

concept of the Philosothon has grown in popularity and spread to other schools worldwide, resulting in increased engagement with philosophy.

One might think that the selection process for those who want to compete in a Philosothon is itself a competitive process, however initially it was not. Wills states that early in the development of Philosothons '… the students self-selected as we sought to set it up as an extension of the Philosophy Club at Hale. But once it became more popular, we would have trials and I would select students based on skills and aptitude' (Wills, email communication).[4] He goes on to say that further down the line teachers, colleagues and students helped to lead the process (Wills 2021). Having a selection process for a Philosothon is no different from having a selection process for a job application, in which typically, several applicants will compete for a job and, hopefully, the person who is best suited for the role will be selected.[5] Similarly, the pupil who best demonstrates the qualities that the CoI requires is most likely to win the Philosothon.

During the Philosothon, individuals are scored based on their display of the relevant skills, 'at present judges award each student in the CoI a mark out of ten for each of three criteria: Critical thinking, Creative thinking and Collaboration' (Buchanan 2018, p. 13). Whilst Philosothons are competitive, Philosothons do not champion competition as their main focus according to the official UK website:

> … the idea is not at all to 'score points', but to enable the group to move towards awareness of underlying concepts that are inherent within the stimulus sent to schools and critical understanding of different positions and arguments that arise as a result of dialogue around the stimulus.[6]

Philosothons, then, seem to provide another example where cooperation and competition can coexist, since not only must participants cooperate with the rules for the competition to exist, but they must cooperate with their teams to display the relevant skills, and those very skills include collaboration with peers. If collaborative behaviours are encouraged, does this create a case where competition actually

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[4]  Email correspondence with Matthew Wills; his response to the question: 'How are students selected to represent their school? Is there a competitive element to the selection process?' Response received 24 October 2021.

[5]  This is not an exact science as sometimes people will be selected for a job for more corruptible reasons, such as nepotism, positive discrimination, or unconscious bias. Ideally, it would be one's merit that decides whether one is selected. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine how much unconscious bias influences who is selected for the Philosothon.

[6]  https://philosothon.co.uk/

supports collaboration? Buchanan's (2018) report of the Australasian Philosothon seems to point to the affirmative. The Philosothon provides an environment which is conducive to cooperative behaviours, as judges identify the skills that they witness students displaying in the context of the Philosothon, these are: '… critical and collaborative skills, support of, and cooperation with their peers, their ability to identify philosophical problems, their ability to articulate complex thoughts and advance discussion through clarifying questions' (Buchanan 2018, p. 12). Rather than competition requiring cooperation to exist, in this case, competition is collaborative. If this is so, the presumption that CoI should not involve competition as it undermines collaboration, loses merit.

**Potential problems with Philosothons**

Philosothons are not without their issues. One criticism that might arise is that a Philosothon does not count as a valid incarnation of the CoI model, since the activity differs from the circumstances of classroom CoI. For example, there are no judges scoring the performance of individual students and choosing a winner at the end. A counterexample to this could be that, just because an individual creates a piece of art for an art competition, does not delegitimise the fact that they have created a piece of art, albeit for the purposes of entering a competition. There is certainly value in creating art for its own sake. However, one might create art for some other reason, but it seems implausible to say that this would destabilise its status as art. In the competition, motivated by a desire to win, it is probable that the individual would put even more effort into their art and therefore potentially create something better than they otherwise would have and develop their skills in the process. Similarly, one could think of the CoI in this way.

Another difference to consider between classroom CoI, and CoI in a Philosothon, is that participants in a Philosothon do not usually know each other prior to the event, compared to regular CoI in a classroom where the pupils already know each other rather well. In the case of the Philosothon, participants will likely have to work harder to cooperate, thus developing their collaboration skills even further. It is also possible that informal competition is reduced in this case, since there are unlikely to be any preconceived ideas about the students they are competing with, such as preestablished rivalries, or friendships which might incline students to agree with whatever their friend says. The Philosothon provides a neutral territory in which the CoI model can flourish.

A more pressing issue that may arise is that children in a Philosothon may simply pretend to collaborate in order to score points and have a better chance at winning. Children from more privileged schools may be especially good at this and ensure that they are familiar with the marking criteria so that they can 'tick as many boxes' as possible. The worry is that they are simply performatively collaborating for the sake of winning rather than trying to develop the relevant skills and qualities that the Philosothon aims to encourage. This pretence of collaboration can be likened to virtue signalling (Levy 2020).

Virtue signalling is the act of signalling to others one's virtuous nature; in the case of the Philosothon, participants would signal their CoI thinking skills, in order to alert the judges of their presence. Virtue signalling gets a bad reputation in that it can instead signal hypocrisy and dishonesty. However, Levy defends virtue signalling and states that 'signalling our commitment to norms is a central and justifiable function of moral discourse' (Levy 2020, p. 9545). Virtue signallers who are accused of hypocrisy, for example, may 'claim to be concerned with injustice, but are actually concerned with themselves' (Levy 2020, p. 9555). A virtue signaller in this instance is more concerned with appearing virtuous and favourable to others than with the content of the issues they profess to care about. Levy argues that the virtue signaller is only hypocritical if 'the agent's motivation in making a moral claim is inconsistent with the content of their claim' (Levy 2020, p. 9556). In the context of the Philosothon, the hypocritical virtue signaller would signal collaboration with others purely for their own gain, in order to increase their chances of winning. This would undermine the very nature of collaboration and, in this case, the charge of hypocrisy would be warranted. Levy (2020) goes on to say that there are not always good reasons to assume that someone who claims to possess a virtue does not also uphold said virtue. Ideally, a good judge would be astute to the difference between those students who are genuinely trying to include everyone and consider other people's ideas; and those who make statements that allude to such behaviours, but do not follow through.

Arguably, in this example, students might still be learning to be collaborative even if they are pretending. Dearden's appeal to Allport's principle of 'functional autonomy' may be helpful here; this is the notion that 'we first go to sea for profit, but then come to love seafaring itself' (Dearden 1972, p. 132; Allport 1937). Dearden uses this principle to justify the use of competition in education as a motivating factor for learning and developing skills and qualities. Likewise, by competing in a philosophy competition, students who pretend to collaborate with others may come to love collaborating and go on to adopt this attitude in other aspects of life extrinsic to

competition. Competition, then, could purely function as a short-term goal in order to serve the long-term goal of developing important philosophical skills and collaborative behaviours. However, the worry that competition may have negative effects on interpersonal relationships arises as Dearden (1972) points out that 'wanting to triumph over others can itself become functionally autonomous' (p. 132). The very fact that a Philosothon specifically rewards and encourages collaboration should hopefully prevent this unfortunate consequence of functional autonomy, but because participants are judged individually, it is still possible to focus on besting opponents rather than working together.

Buchanan (2018) implicitly remarks on this issue when she relays feedback from several judges who suggested some improvements that could be made to future Philosothons. In response to the method of scoring participants, the judges suggested that the scoring ought to represent the group efforts in more cases rather than solely individual efforts (Buchanan 2018). 'One judge suggested giving each CoI a score for overall group performance which would contribute to each student's score and would encourage collaborative behaviours' (Buchanan 2018, p. 13). Whilst it is not explicitly stated that students were pretending to collaborate in order to increase their individual scores, it might be assumed that some of the judges could have been aware of students performatively collaborating, or were at least pre-empting the possibility. It would be logical in a competition that rewards collaboration to reward group efforts; not only would it prevent false collaboration which rewards the individual, it would also make more sense to reward group effort in a competition focused on collaboration.

**Conclusion**

Overall, competition and cooperation do not conflict, they are not mutually exclusive terms in the way that some P4C advocates claim. It is entirely possible to have collaboration without competition, but there cannot be competition without collaboration. Philosothons provide an example where not only does competition require cooperation to function, but that the nature of the competition itself increases collaboration. The concern that competition undermines interpersonal relationships is undermined by the very fact that again, a Philosothon is rooted in collaborating with others and participants are rewarded for doing so. The concern that students may pretend to collaborate persists but may be alleviated by functional autonomy, in that by pretending to collaborate students may grow to enjoy it and practice it in the future. The concern that besting others itself may become functionally autonomous persists,

however, the suggestion to reward group effort rather than individual performance in future Philosothons may help to avoid this outcome. With an added element of competition, students are encouraged to develop the relevant skills such as critical, caring, creative and collaborative thinking, since it is the display of these skills that is rewarded in the Philosothon. Therefore, there does not seem to be any good reason to exclude competition from philosophy and there is nothing overtly worrying about the notion of a philosophy competition. The benefits that Philosothons provide, such as: encouraging engagement in philosophy; developing philosophical thinking skills and promoting P4C pedagogy in schools, far outweigh the worries raised in this paper—worries that with some tweaking can easily be addressed.

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