

The Impact of Philosophy for Children in a High School English Class

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Abstract: This paper explores the theory and application of the University of Hawaii's Philosophy in the Schools Project's adaptation of Philosophy for Children (P4C) in a secondary English class. The structure and foundations of P4C are discussed through a brief theoretical review of the community of inquiry, intellectual safety, reasoning and philosophical dialogue. The literature is used to examine, construct and assess a 10-week study that subjected 32 students to P4C 5 times a week. The findings are hopeful and indicate this philosophical approach to the secondary curriculum improves students' reasoning and engages them with the academic content by encouraging them to think for themselves. The intellectually safe community of inquiry allowed the students to explore, practice and internalize the aspects of "good" reasoning through the activity of philosophy, thus making them self-creators and good thinkers who could construct meaning on their own. With the improved ability to personally create meaning, the students were able to make school relevant to their lives outside of the classroom. As one student said, "I actually use what I learn in this class outside of class."

Key words: Secondary, philosophy, children, engagement, meaning, reasoning, inquiry, community, thinking, Lipman

"...children hunger for meaning, and get turned off by education when it ceases to be meaningful to them."¹

Education is in a crisis. The media reminds us of this every day with stories documenting recent test scores, annual yearly reports and teacher layoffs. However, the problem is much larger than these reported or any that lie in problems of funding, standards implementation or literacy scores. Classrooms around the country are filled with bored, apathetic and unmotivated students who see little meaning or usefulness in school. The purpose of school has become solely an extrinsic one; "I have to go to school so I can get a good job." Schools must move from being institutions that give students extrinsic meanings to institutions that provide students with the necessary circumstances and tools that will allow each to personally construct meaning in their own learning and lives.

The continued irrelevance and disregard of the students' experiences, questions and ideas by schools has too often left them with the inability to think responsibly for themselves; the school has told them what to think and why to think it. The meanings students strive to attain have been pre-packaged by the textbook curriculum, and when they attempt to reason for themselves, they are given no time or tools to do so. In short, the school, teachers and curriculum do not trust the student or view their questions and insights as having educational significance.

What the school does succeed in introducing into the child is... a distrust of any intellectual powers of his own other than what it takes to cope with problems formulated and assigned to him by others...The child distrusts not only his own intellectual capacities, but those of his classmates as well.²

Schools encourage students to be uncritical consumers of information rather than people who can think for themselves. This causes students to develop an identity that encourages them to rely on outside influences to create who they are. They are told what to do in order to be "successful," while being robbed of an opportunity to create and/or find their identity within the structure of academics. In the traditional idea of the school, the student's *personhood* is completely ignored; their interests, questions, comments, experiences, beliefs, and curiosity, all of which are aspects of the person, are disregarded. The institution does not rely on or even use these elements of the person in their own "education." It simply provides the student with the "meaningful" things that will make them a successful person. How can you make a successful person if you do not even know what that person needs to be successful, or do not explore what is meant by "success"?

To determine if these attitudes characterized my students, I administered a survey on the first day of class to examine their reasoning skills, attitudes towards school and how significant they think school is to other areas of their life. On these initial surveys, in addition to providing little or no reasoning to explain their answers, an overwhelming majority of my students thought school, as well as my class, had no meaningful connection to their lives outside of school. They believed school was boring, but necessary to go to college and "make a lot of money." Sounds familiar doesn't it? Although it is important for the curriculum to prepare students for life after high school, it does not necessarily mean school has to be boring and disconnected.

By no means am I suggesting that the curriculum be thrown in the trash and the students be given free reign in the classroom! However, what I sensed was needed to make school personally meaningful for students was to provide them with tools that help them develop their ability to construct meaning for themselves, in addition to a nurturing environment in which it is safe to do so. Until these necessary conditions are established, it seems to me, schools will fail to provide what the student really needs, and these consequences will be far reaching; a nation full of people who rely on medicine, alcohol, drugs, constant career changes and broken families in order to search for a instrument that will provide them with the meaning they never learned to create on their own.

Something must be done to enable children to acquire meaning for themselves (sic). They will not acquire such meaning merely by learning the contents of adult knowledge. They must be taught to think and, in particular, to think for themselves. Thinking is the skill *par excellence* that enables us to acquire meanings.³

1. How do we get there? Philosophy for Children.

The solution does not involve teaching students *about* good thinking or reasoning skills through pre-packaged programs with workbooks and worksheets, nor does it mean structuring the curriculum only around students' interests. To address problems in engagement and reasoning, the curriculum must encourage students to personally construct meaning through the practice and improvement of their thinking and reasoning; enter Philosophy for Children.

It is virtually impossible to categorize Philosophy for Children (P4C) simply as a curriculum or program. It has grown well beyond Matthew Lipman's original approach, into a limitless and extensive worldwide movement that has been adapted and expanded to serve the various populations across the globe. However, P4C remains a disciplined effort to teach children to think more deeply by engaging them in thoughtful discussions with each other. "It is based around the notion that they must construct meanings for themselves, rather than simply accept those which are handed down to them."⁴ The use of philosophical dialogue in an intellectually safe community of inquiry sharpens students' abilities to think for themselves, allowing them to create personal meaning in the world around them.

2. The Community of Inquiry.

"At the heart of philosophy is...dialogue... This is why education cannot be divorced from philosophy and philosophy cannot be divorced from education."⁵

In doing P4C, reasoning skills are not taught out of context, but through dialogue in a community of inquiry. For this to occur the community must be intellectually safe. "In an intellectually safe place there are no put-downs and no comments intended to belittle, undermine, negate, devalue or ridicule. Within this place, the group accepts virtually any question or comment, so long as it is respectful of other members."⁶ This understanding gives way to a respect for opposing viewpoints and claims that often arise out of an inquiry. Rather than having differences divert the direction of the inquiry into an argument or popularity contest, an intellectually safe class will recognize, examine and celebrate them. This awareness is necessary to create a less intimidating classroom environment, allowing for all students to be active contributors to the learning process.

To foster an intellectually safe classroom, I began to lay the groundwork by arranging the desks in a large circle, allowing each student to better see and hear one another during the course of the inquiry. Additionally, this allowed them to see each other's nonverbal mannerisms, which often increased their understanding of one another because they could see *how* they were saying it. Furthermore, on the first day I introduced the idea of intellectual safety and emphasized that any act that infringed upon the community's safety would not be tolerated because this class would rely on students feeling comfortable taking risks, showing emotion, asking questions and giving personal insight.

On our first day together we created a "community ball," which would be used as a tool to facilitate discussion.⁷ The ball gradually empowered the students to feel comfortable calling on each other, which gave them increasing ownership of their inquiry. The rules of the ball were to be understood and followed by all; the person with the ball could pass it to whom ever he or she wished, however, no student was obligated to speak and had the absolute right to pass. The ball enabled each student to have a voice and assured they were heard by all members of the community.

Another important feature of the P4C community is its self-corrective nature. In order to gauge the community's growth towards being intellectually safe for all students, the community conducted routine reflections and evaluations. These reflections assessed the direction and depth of each inquiry, individual thinking and personal participation, as well as the overall "safeness" of the community. Rather than relying on

the teacher to be the sole source of assessment, the students' own evaluations contributed to directing and maintaining the community.

From the beginning, students' interests, questions, concerns and experiences were the directing force behind the inquiry. *Their* ideas were to be considered, heard and tested by all members of this community. The direction of knowledge on a topic would not be controlled by the teacher, school or textbook, but developed sensitive to the progression of the students' reasoning and thinking, expressed in the form of their questions, comments and shared experiences presented in the dialogue of the community. I hoped dialogue conducted in this way would encourage deeper thought and expose students to experiences and ideas, which were often different from their own. The exchange of ideas would give birth to a forum where students would be able to practice using and honing their ability to reason.

3. **Good Reasoning Through the Use of the Good Thinker's Toolkit.**

It is necessary to understand that in P4C, improved reasoning and thinking occur in conjunction with dialogue in the community, not independently of it. In a successful P4C community, good thinking and dialogue develop together. In this context, students become willing to take risks, honing their ability to reason, thereby contributing to the learning community as a whole. In this setting, students learn more from each other than they would from a textbook, novel or the teacher.

To learn in concrete ways what improved reasoning involves, the students were introduced to and were provided multiple opportunities to practice Thomas Jackson's Good Thinker's Toolkit (GTTK).⁸ Students learn to be prepared to back up any claim or insight, such as an inference, with relevant evidence or reasons to identify hidden assumptions and so on. These are dispositions necessary to construct personal meaning, as well as essential elements in inquiry.

4. **What Happened?**

Shortly after introducing the ideas of a community of inquiry and the GTTK, the students read their first short story. From here, the students were to participate in an activity called "Plain Vanilla."⁹ Essentially, every student was to pose a question about the story using the Good Thinker's Toolkit and the students were to vote on the question they most wanted to community to focus their inquiry on.

The results were at once revealing and discouraging. No question used any aspect of the GTTK and some students chose not to participate. The majority of the class voted on the general comprehension question of "What is the story about?" The ensuing "inquiry" consisted of one student's interpretation, for which she offered no evidence to support it. This student gave her interpretation and the rest of the students were ready for me to tell them what it was about. The students assumed the teacher had the single "right" answer and felt they were wrong if they did not provide the exact answer the teacher was looking for, regardless of the supporting evidence. At this point, the students relied on one student to test her idea and were then ready for me to do the reasoning for them, as they had seen it done so many times before. "Ok already! Tell us what it is about."

This indicated the students still held the assumption that the teacher was the provider all of the answers. It was now clear that these students needed much more practice using these new reasoning abilities to break long established habits and conditioning before they could use them as a way to interpret the world around them.

In an effort to accomplish this, I introduced a series of challenging texts¹⁰ to help the students internalize some of the reasoning skills found in the Good Thinker's Toolkit. Activities such as journaling, discussion and essay writing encouraged the students to internally draw upon their thoughts and ideas to interpret the text. Instead of learning simply about the content of a text, the text became a medium through which thinking and exploration would occur. Through these activities, the students learned not only to form their interpretation of the story by using aspects of good thinking, but they assessed their own interpretation as to how their evidence compared to their peers'; they were thinking about their thinking. This was a clear indication that the community of inquiry was developing. Each student began to demonstrate their ability to use the GTTK to create personal meaning and to actively listen to how their peers interpreted the same text, adjusting their own interpretation as they saw fit. The next step was to apply these skills for a prolonged period of time in order to "scratch beneath the surface" of a single text.

The class began reading Laurie Anderson's *Speak*, a young adult novel which depicts a fourteen-year-old girl who has stopped speaking. The author does not clearly state the reasons for the girl's disposition and angst, leaving the majority of the book free for multiple interpretations and questioning. It was evident that the reasoning skills learned in the previous activities had carried over as the students welcomed the ambiguity of the story. Less time was formally spent on using and practicing the GTTK, however, good reasoning continued to be the means students used in order to be successful in the class; they would not be tested on facts from the book or write a book report. Instead, they were responsible for generating questions and comments that would help the community personally interpret this novel.

To help accomplish this, students were to complete a bookmark¹¹ with each of their assigned readings as a way to individually apply the skills used in the community. The questions, comments and thoughts raised on their individual bookmarks became the source of our inquiries about the text. Student examples include:

- “*What does she mean by truth?*” -Cassy
- “*If Heather was Melinda’s friend then what are the reasons for her to not stick up for Melinda in the bleacher scene?*” -Jodie
- “*I inferred that Melinda’s parents are kind of rich because she said the closest they came to worship is the trinity of Visa, MasterCard and American Express.*” -Trevor
- “*Where is the line between friends and just popularity drawn? Does she really want friends for companionship or for popularity?*” -Darcie
- “*Melinda doesn’t get the message to go to the library, so she ends up being very late. This reminds me of how scared I was my freshman year about being late to classes.*” -Emi

Note that in these questions and responses, nowhere will you find “what is this book about?” as was the case in the beginning of the study. This indicated the students had internalized good reasoning skills and were learning to think for themselves.¹²

5. Discussion: Becoming Good Thinkers.

Over time, after being exposed to this approach to literature, the students began to break the routine that had been established by their prior teachers and classes. The class moved from the notion that their thoughts, ideas and questions were only “right” if they aligned with those of the teacher or textbook, and that some authority figure had all of the answers and would explain “what the story is about” once they had finished reading. As the students were able to overcome these assumptions and realize that their personal experiences and views, properly supported by reasons and evidence were being listened to and taken seriously by their peers they began to seriously engage with the literature.

The intellectually safe environment provided students the comfort to challenge others’ interpretations of texts by questioning or providing alternate evidence, reasons and examples. Additionally, the students were using the same evidence to support far different claims which shows they not only were growing comfortable with ambiguity, but also more confident in their ability to think for themselves. Their interpretations were grounded in personal connections supported by reasons indicating they were no longer passively subservient to authority, but willing to challenge from their own reasoned point of view.

Philosophy offers children a chance to discuss those concepts, such as truth, that cut across all other disciplines but are openly examined by none. It provides a forum in which children can discover for themselves the relevance to their lives of the ideas that have shaped the lives of everyone.¹³

The combination discussed above of both tools and context to allow students to think for themselves resulted in the students *doing* philosophy. The students’ thoughts and questions often pushed the community’s inquiries and discussions to that of the “philosophical.” The students examined issues and paralleled arguments professional philosophers have been writing about for over 2,000 years. In response to the texts probed, the students raised and discussed issues regarding happiness, freedom, religion, trust, friendship, love, courage, reality and existence. In the beginning, I never imagined the community would be moved to examining existence or artificial intelligence by means of a young adult novel. The students’ improved reasoning within an intellectually safe community of inquiry set the stage for class inquiries that became both extremely personal and rigorous. The students examined their own values, beliefs and experiences enabling them to meaningfully connect with the text and the philosophical concepts that had been presented. Hearing other students’ examples, reasons and interpretations allowed the community to explore these difficult topics openly with each other and, as many students indicated, they developed and expanded their own beliefs.

6. Conclusion.

At the beginning of this study, these students had no interest in exploring anything more than the summary of a story. The questions they posed, as well as their lack of interest in participating in an inquiry, were clear indicators of their unwillingness to engage complex issues that lack single correct answers. The end of the study reveals a very different community than this. Not only were the students discussing and weighing ideas about these philosophical issues, but they came about after examining a young adult novel not known for its deep philosophical content. The students were able to use the tools practiced in the community as a way to examine their own lives, values, beliefs and experiences, which allowed them to create personal significance to the

academic content. More significantly, the students not only recognized their intellectual growth, but also expressed a relevancy of my class that they had previously denied.

It is very clear that depriving students of the classroom structure and tools to personally construct meaning disconnects them from the academic content and alienates them from their own learning. The addition of a thinking skills program and the injection of the idea of “community” into a curriculum will not, by itself, improve the students’ ability to reason and create meaning. These components need to be utilized in conjunction with dialogue, which will allow the students to explore, practice and internalize these aspects of reasoning through the activity of philosophy, thus making them self-creators and good thinkers who can construct meaning on their own. Once students take ownership of these skills, personally constructing meaning will become a natural part of the learning process, in conjunction with, or in spite, of the schools.

Notes

¹ Matthew Lipman, “Philosophy for Children. In *Thinking children and education*, ed. Matthew Lipman “Dubuque, IA, 1993),

² Matthew Lipman, “Philosophy for Children. In *Thinking children and education*, ed. Matthew Lipman “Dubuque, IA, 1993), 376-377.

³ Matthew Lipman, Ann Sharp & Fredrich Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the classroom*. (Philadelphia, PA, 1980), 13.

⁴ Lawrence Splitter & Ann Sharp, *Teaching for Better Thinking*. (Australia, 1995), 99.

⁵ Matthew Lipman & Ann Sharp, *Growing Up With Philosophy*. (Philadelphia, PA, 1978) 259.

⁶ Tom Jackson, The art and craft of “Gently Socratic” inquiry. In *Developing minds: A resource book for teaching thinking* (3rd Ed). ed. A. Costa. Alexandria, VA, 2001), 460.

⁷ Ibid, 462.

⁸ Reasoning behaviors defined by Sharp, 1993; DeBono, 1976; Dewey, 1910; Jastrow, 1931; Paul, 1989; Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1979, shed light on Jackson’s (2001) Good Thinker’s Toolkit: “Giving and asking for reasons, detecting assumptions, anticipating consequences, reflecting on and the use of inferences, asking for clarification, and seeking evidence and examples as well as counterexamples” (p. 463).

⁹ Jackson, 2001, 462.

¹⁰ Various photographs, artwork, music and short stories, including Calvino’s “Happy Man’s Shirt,” Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” and Kincaid’s “Girl” were used as the medium to practice and become comfortable using the Good Thinker’s Toolkit as a way to interpret literature.

¹¹ Bookmarks allow students to record thoughts, questions and interpretations as they read. Students are to use the Good Thinker’s Toolkit as a means to look for clarity and reasons, make inferences, provide evidence, question assumptions and make personal connections to the text.

¹² These responses from the bookmarks are not only typical of a large majority of the class, but the deep comments and questions occurred on a more consistent basis for each student throughout the seven assigned bookmarks.

¹³ Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy goes to school*. Philadelphia, PA, 1988), vii.

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