Bringing P4C Into the Undergraduate Classroom

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Everything I know about teaching I learned from P4C.

I'm not sure if that's *completely* accurate. However, it is true that P4C has been central to my pedagogical style, reflections, and refinement as I have emerged onto the college scene after a few years learning the ropes from scores of grade school students. Teaching, its practice and improvement, has been central to my graduate experience at the University of Hawaii. My initiation into the philosophy of teaching and education that I have applied throughout my classroom experiences these last five years began with Dr. Thomas Jackson's "Philosophy with Children" seminar. Clearly, it would be a mistake to assume that this course and the Philosophy in the Schools Project are applicable only to the teaching of elementary school children. Rather, the philosophy of teaching that we develop and implement is applicable to any classroom. This essay is an attempt to convey the central idea of P4C—the fostering of reflective communities of inquiry—and then explain how I have brought my P4C training, experiences, and methodology into the college classroom.

Our Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

What we endeavor to create in the Philosophy in the Schools Project are "reflective communities of inquiry" within every classroom, elementary or otherwise. We begin by fostering the development of *community* through the establishment of intellectually safe places for thoughtful engagement and inquiry. In an intellectually safe place, respect for persons and ideas is paramount, thereby creating a space for a diversity of viewpoints. Questioning of others and ourselves is central; active listening is valued as highly as speaking. As a result, learning becomes a genuinely empowering, and hence, joyful experience. As part of this community-oriented learning environment, the community as a whole, as opposed to "the Teacher," establishes the guidelines by which dialogue shall proceed and the criteria that will be used to evaluate community inquiries. This, in part, is what is meant by a *reflective* community—that is, reflection refers not only to the ability to reflect on the subject matter at hand, but, further, to reflect on the process by which learning was achieved or, perhaps, failed to be achieved according to the group's own standards.

Finally, the community is engaged collaboratively in *inquiry*. This is where the philosophical component of our work is perhaps most recognizable. Above and beyond the "facts" of a particular topic (and, in the case of a college course, the assigned reading materials), members of the community develop the skills necessary to take inquiry to a deeper and more intellectually rigorous level. As the community strengthens, there is an expectation that reasons will be given to support views, that evidence will be sought in support of claims, that recognition of ambiguity and the consequent clarification of meaning is necessary, that assumptions and implications will be pursued, and that counter-examples will be envisioned to test the truth of the claims being made. The exercise of these thinking tools, coupled with a responsibility for one's own thinking and participation in the inquiry, transforms students—too many of whom have internalized the role of passive listener—into active co-inquirers, reflective thinkers, and lifetime learners.

Prior to my teaching on the UH Manoa campus, I worked as a teaching assistant in the Philosophy in the Schools Project for two and one half years. During that time, I engaged in philosophical dialogues on a weekly basis with over twenty classes in Hawai'i's public schools ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade. While the formation of an intellectually safe place and the practice of higher-order thinking skills are of first importance in preparing for philosophical inquiry, "doing" philosophy with children advances far beyond these initial requirements. Although these young students do not engage directly with traditional philosophical theories, their chosen topics and the depth of their insights are far-reaching and rich. It is not uncommon, within the course of the year, for the students to inquire into the nature of reality, space, and time, the existence of God and the role of religion, the definition of hap-

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piness and the good life, the structure of society and government, the value of science and technology, and numerous ethical questions that they encounter in their lives. Being a member of these dynamic communities has been of enormous benefit to me in developing patience and active listening, recognizing student insights (however inchoate) and pursuing them, adapting to the community's interests and skills, designing creative approaches to different topics, sharing in the satisfaction of intellectually hard work, and preparing for the element of surprise. It was with this experience of genuine learning and this philosophy of teaching that I first stepped into a UH classroom in January 2001—expecting nothing less from my college students than what I had received from my grade school philosophers.

Special Challenges of the College Setting

The above description of reflective communities of inquiry is, of course, an ideal—but an approachable one. Each community has unique challenges and promises that will shape how its successes are defined and achieved. A teacher or facilitator must become quickly attuned to his or her community's particularities in order to begin laying the foundation for such success. While I do not wish to stereotype all elementary and college students, I do want to point out a couple differences that I've noticed in working with the two groups. For example, I've found that younger students are much more open to change and experimentation in learning situations, and this lends itself to a more creative and imaginative engagement with thinking. They are often very free and comfortable with exploring new ideas with each other. This freedom is, I believe, a direct result of the intellectual and emotional safety created by the classroom teacher and continuously fostered by the philosophy facilitator. When such safety has not been developed and practiced, there is a very noticeable effect on all members of the classroom community.

College students, on the other hand, are very often a product of the kind of information-laden, heavily structured environment that is characteristic of most U.S. high schools. By the time they enter college, they are rather accustomed to this style of teaching and learning, have mastered it to some extent, and rely on it to continue. College students are accustomed to the instructor being "The Teacher" and passing along information that will then be returned on tests and quizzes. The possibility of classroom engagement and dialogue is something that often creates great anxiety—especially for those who were considered the top students in

high school.

Another factor that can impede genuine learning that I have noticed here at the University of Hawai'i—which is largely a "commuter school" for undergraduates—is the "coolness factor." Many of the students in any given class may have gone to high school together or have some sort of tie to other students. While this may produce an instant community of engaged learners, it may also perpetuate a situation in which the peer pressure to conform has never gone away. College then may never become the opportunity where the student steps out of his or her element and really explores and challenges her own thoughts, opinions, and goals. Rather, at its worst, it is simply an extension of high school—with all the trappings, associations, and expectations that go along with it. I do not want to claim that this situation represents an ultimate barrier to P4C goals, but it may be a characteristic of every community that facilitators must attend to in order to devise creative means for breaking through the walls that we build around o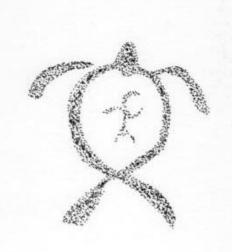urselves. Once students begin to open up to each other and the given topic of a course, there is so much productive energy and enthusiasm that follows.

In addition to the unique make-up and expectations of the members of a community, every classroom will have particular constraints that will limit what can be done—for example, time, subject matter, class size, and so forth. One of our mottoes in the Philosophy in the Schools Project is "We're not in a rush to get anywhere… but that doesn't mean we're not going somewhere." However, in a college course, we often are in a rush to get somewhere or, at the very least, there is an expectation that certain material will be covered. This differs from our experience in the elementary classroom where P4C facilitators often pursue inquiries that are of the students' choosing for as long as the community interest holds. Striking a balance between the limitations imposed by required course content and time for open-ended student-directed inquiry is a skill that is difficult to master. Depending on the subject matter of a course, I have found it most productive to creatively intermingle lectures, community dialogues, student-initiated inquiries, group presentations and dialogue facilitation.

P4C Methods in the College Classroom

Over the past two and one half years, I have taught six introductory courses at UH—ranging from women's studies, introduction to philosophy, ethics, and logic—and assisted with one upper-division course. With the exception of the logic courses, I have attempted to bring P4C peda-

gogy and methods into each one of these classes with varying degrees of success and many kinds of challenges. While I must admit that I have not even come close to perfecting the union of P4C and college teaching, I outline here some of the methods that I have employed.

1. *Community Building*

I honestly believe that building a strong community is *the* most important element in a successful classroom. The community serves as the primary foundation upon which learning and serious inquiry can happen. In many ways, it seems like the inquiry can take care of itself if the community is well established. While this is not necessarily the case, forming a safe community should always be the first goal of a teacher or facilitator. While difficult to define, safety may be best understood as an atmosphere of equality and freedom within a community. Classrooms are safe when there is a natural ease and mutual willingness to share ideas and explore them together. Safe classrooms are most easily recognized in contrast to unsafe ones — where tension, hesitation, embarrassment and/or hostility hang heavy in the air. When unsafe classroom dynamics are allowed to continue over time, it becomes all the more difficult to establish community and, therefore, to really become immersed in engaged dialogue.

The methods for forming a safe community in the college classroom are very much the same as the ones we use during P4C in the elementary school classroom. The first step is for the community members to get to know one another. While this may not seem so important, it allows each student to be recognized as a member of the community with certain responsibilities to himself or herself and to the group. Also, the community can begin to get a sense of the unique particularity of each member and will begin to see how each perspective contributes something special to the ongoing inquiry. This process begins with a simple restructuring of the classroom setting so that all members — the teacher included — are facing one another in a circle. This can be done by moving chairs or by rearranging seminar tables. This new arrangement not only allows students to really see and participate with others, but there's also something about having to face the other members that reinforces the classroom activity as a shared endeavor to which everyone is responsible.

Like the elementary P4C classroom, I like to begin each course by making a community ball. The process of making a community ball together allows the members to hear from each other and begin to know one another. Since the community ball marks who is speaking in the classroom, the practice of tossing the ball around the classroom switches the classroom dynamics from a normally teacher-centered activity to a community activity. With the community ball, we can easily track the movement of the ball, and thus the speaking, around the classroom. If the ball seems to always go back to the teacher or other outspoken members, inquiries can be differently structured so as to open the dialogue to more students. While the community ball is an effective way to get students involved in the dialogue, it may also pose as an obstacle in some college classrooms. For example, the community ball may be considered too childish or "kiddy." Throwing around a yarn ball certainly isn't necessary in college where all students are supposedly mature and eager to engage in adult-level discussions. I have faced resistance in the use of the community ball, but I have also seen how much it helps the students take charge of their 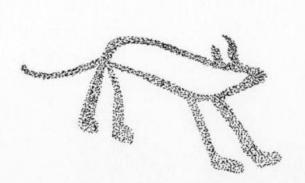own communities of learning. It allows members of the community to reign in outspoken students who often dominate class discussion as well as giving more quiet students the forum in which to speak. Indeed, resistance to the community ball may even reflect resistance to community learning itself. The best way for a facilitator to break through this resistance is to model how one can let one's guard down, relax, and, in the process, reinvigorate a love for learning.

2. *Taking Responsibility for Classroom Dialogues*

As I described above, part of what it means to have a strong community is a sense of responsibility for what goes on within that community. In P4C, this responsibility shifts from the teacher as the sole authority and disciplinarian to the whole community as a self-evaluative and corrective unit. This means that the community is responsible for the amount of safety sustained during a dialogue as well as the quality of that dialogue — meaning how good the group was at "scratching beneath the surface" of a given topic or question. Students may not always want that kind of responsibility — even as a whole. They may not want to deal with issues of student non-participation in class dialogues, outspoken, aggressive, or overly opinionated students, or the quality of class discussion. However, if the classroom is going to be a reflective community of inquiry, these are exactly the kinds of issues that the community must sort through together.

In one particular class, I had all three of these problems going on simultaneously. I tried to gently urge students to

take control of their education and the class and to steer it the way they thought it should be going. This gentle urging, however, was to no avail and students were getting increasingly frustrated. When these breakdowns of community and inquiry begin to emerge, I find it best to break from the routine of class and focus specifically on the problems in the classroom. This can be done by opening a forum through which students can evaluate how the class is going, their participation in shaping its direction, and brainstorm about creative methods for getting the class back on track. I've found that students really respond when the instructor takes a genuine interest in hearing what they have to say about the class and its trajectory. After these evaluation sessions, classes can often start afresh with a new set of methods and rules for the dialogue that can help refocus the community on their shared goals.

3. Critical Reflections: Self and Group Evaluations

Once a safe community is established, I think that evaluations play the next biggest role in ensuring the success (however defined) of the class. Group evaluations can be community activities, as just described. Or they can take the form of individual, written evaluations of both class and personal participation. For example, before and after group work, I like students, both within and outside the groups, to evaluate individual and group participation and learning. The most important aspect of evaluations is, I believe, their regularity. In many P4C elementary classrooms, evaluations of community safety, depth of inquiry, and fun and interest level have become a reflective way to close each session. Perhaps such frequency is not necessary in the college classroom, but setting aside time and a forum to discuss the process of collaborative learning is surely helpful—though sometimes difficult and challenging—in reaching the kinds of goals that the group has envisioned. In terms of student evaluations (namely, grades), I evaluate not only class participation, these self- and group evaluations, and group assignments, but also a fair amount of writing where I can track the depth and sophistication of their individual inquiry in the field.

4. Community in Action: Group Work

A good measure of how your class operates as a reflective community of inquiry is to assign group projects that revolve around classroom teaching and the facilitation of community dialogue. While this may seem like a hefty assignment for intro students, I like to save this activity as a sort of course culmination exercise. Towards the end of the semester, students are familiar with community dialogues and have participated in and reflected upon both successful and failed attempts within our classroom. As an example of this kind of group activity, in an introduction to ethics course, I had the students pick three contemporary ethical issues that they, as a class, wanted to explore. After we had chosen the topics, the class divided into three groups based

on their interest in the selected issues. Each group was then responsible for three class days in which they covered their topics. They were responsible for assigning reading materials, doing outside research, structuring the class days, presenting the issue, and facilitating at least one full day of dialogue. I thoroughly enjoyed watching these students go through the process of learning from one another, playing off each other's strengths, brainstorming methods to pique their classmates' interest in their topic, and struggling through the dialogue facilitation. Most satisfying, of course, was the pleasure they took in their own achievements—particularly in their ability to take on the responsibility for teaching and to really think through how they could make it a truly collective undertaking.

Elementary vs. College Classrooms

This portrayal of my experiences as a P4C-educated college instructor is *not* intended to paint a dichotomous picture of education—where the elementary classroom is an emotionally safe, fun-loving, free, and creative environment for the exploration of profound ideas and the college classroom is a place of conflict-ridden communities incapable of engaging intellectually with one another. Actually, both environments can be silly or serious, profound or mundane, frustrating or exhilarating. Perhaps one advantage that P4C facilitators and teachers have in the college classroom that is sometimes lacking in the elementary classroom is the visibility of direct and lasting results. Through my work in the Philosophy in the Schools Project, I have witnessed the beginnings of a transformation of young people's thinking and the development of a certain philosophical awareness through the process of community dialogue. However, in this work, there is always an understanding that we are only planting a seed—a seed that must be nurtured through the course of one's education with the help of parents and teachers. We proceed with the faith that the seed that is planted—the love and respect for thinking and ideas—can somehow survive through an educational and social environment that may be constantly working against it. In contrast, working with college students, I see immediate and powerful changes in the way they perceive and think about the world. Through class discussion and even more in their writing, the impact of both the content and the skills learned in this class are clearly visible and are continuously being refined. Of course, I cannot be entirely assured that one class will turn them all into deeply profound thinkers or socially responsible individuals, but I am sure with new thinking tools and collaborative learning skills, they will walk away as different people and will be better off, in some way, as a result. This is not to say that we should wait until the time of higher education to provide such tools. But until we turn all our children into philosophers and keen social observers and reformers, we are lucky to have the opportunity to teach and learn and positively change each other's lives—at any point therein.