

The Top 10 Things I LOVE about p4c Hawai'i

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In 2001, Dr. Thomas Jackson, or Dr. J as we affectionately call him, spoke to the faculty at Waikiki Elementary. He described p4c Hawai'i and encouraged us to try P4C if something about it “resonated” with us. “Resonate” is a great description—I felt like something deep inside began to hum as he described the program. In the beginning, Dr. J held a p4t (philosophy for teachers) after-school seminar and he, along with some graduate students, did p4c in our classes. That is how my p4c Hawai'i experience began.

Here we are several years later. I have been asked to share my perceptions of p4c. In speaking with my colleagues, I realize that p4c is many things to many people. At the very heart of p4c is safety. A safe community, a place where people feel safe to share ideas without judgment or ridicule, is the foundation of the p4c circle. That said, I want to share the top ten things I LOVE about p4c.

#1 “We’re not in a rush.”

That’s what Dr. J always reminds us. We know you can’t hurry a child’s development, but sometimes we forget. In our hurried society, with immediate gratification as the goal, many people are focused on quick results. These quick results are not always good in the long run. p4c does not always have immediate results, but it can be profound in the long run.

My start was very slow. I felt p4c was wonderful and I was excited to see it implemented in my class. We had a p4c session with Mr. Chip (a graduate student) each week for forty-five minutes. For more than half a year nothing happened! Students were not showing evidence of deeper thinking. It was getting close to the end of the year and I decided not to do it the following year. Then we had a breakthrough, a “blossoming”! A child asked if thinking ever stops. They discussed whether dreams were thinking during sleep. They wondered if and what babies thought. They wondered if animals thought because they wondered if the animals that attacked had a conscience. What about insects? Plants? Do they think? Yes and no, and all backed up with logical reasons for their point of view. That conversation

was so deep I almost wept! After that, our p4c sessions were very rich. I think I was incredibly patient to wait as long as I did. If not for Mr. Chip, I would’ve quit much earlier, but he knew “we’re not in a rush.”

#2–8 The Good Thinker’s Tool Kit uses a seven-letter acronym to help us examine our thinking, ideas, and beliefs.

I love the Tool Kit because the tools are a way of examining thinking. If I say “The moon is made of cheese,” what are my reasons? what is my evidence? can I give any examples? are there counter examples? Students make statements, then they are asked for their reasoning using the Tool Kit. Others agree or disagree and justify their comments using the Tool Kit. Students learn how to think, rather than what to think. Here are the seven tools as I understand them and love them:

W—What do you mean by that? When a person makes a statement that we don’t understand right away we use the W. We also use it to define what we are asking. We use the W to make sure we are talking about the same thing, for example, “What do you mean by *magic*?” When a person explains his or her own ideas it helps the speaker define and clarify his or her ideas. It helps the speaker focus and discard irrelevant information. The “W” also helps the listeners. Sometimes the initial statement led us to a very different assumption and the “W” helps us to get closer to what the speaker means.

R—What are your reasons? The R is my favorite letter. It is easy for a second grader to understand the request “give me a reason”, but it takes thinking to a deeper level”. A simple concept like what is your favorite toy, food, etc. is usually easy to answer. When giving a reason is attached to the question, there is a deeper understanding of what a person values or believes. It is the tool in the thinkers’ Tool Kit that most people use even before they have heard of p4c.

A—What are you assuming? Assumption is a difficult concept for second graders. I usually tells them that an assumption is something we believe to be true. It may or may not be true, but it is treated as the truth. Sometimes we use

assume to assist the dialogue. “Let’s assume Santa is real. If Santa is real can he die?” We don’t need to discuss the idea of Santa being real (although that is one of my favorite topics with second graders), to discuss his immortality. The word *assume* has a bad rap and that is because assumptions can be dangerous. Learning what *assume* means helps us to understand how assumptions can be dangerous.

I–What can we infer from a belief? Inferences ask us to think about consequences. They involve us in if...,then... thinking. I sometimes struggle to differentiate infer and assume. I use our reading response definition (as I understand it) for infer. “When we infer, we use clues, things we already know and make predictions (or guesses) about what might be true.” It is different (in my mind) from an assumption because an assumption is believed to be true, while an inference, we realize, may or may not be true. I like to use to this activity to teach inference: When a guest joins us, we look at the person and make some inferences about that person: Who is he or she? What does that person do? Are they married? Do they have children? What hobbies do they have? It’s a fun and easy way to talk about *infer*. Then the guest gets to validate or invalidate our inferences.

I used an example of if...,then... thinking in the Santa topic: “if Santa is real, can he die?” However, I rarely use the if...,then... strategy. But **if** I use it, **then** it is probably attached to an inquiry.

T–Is it true? Always? Sometimes? “Is it true?” is an interesting question for second graders because to them, almost everything is true and real. Ask a second grader if magic is real, the Tooth Fairy, dragons. It generates a really interesting conversation. Sometimes they will also talk about things that scare them: monsters, ghosts, etc. If you ask, “Is it true always?” you get them closer to discriminating between what is true and real and what is not. Also, someone may make a statement such as “Boys don’t like ballet.” If you ask if that is true they will probably say yes. Then ask if it is always true. They will start to realize that if it is not always true, it might not be true at all.

E–Can you provide an example or offer evidence? In second grade asking students for evidence is a useful task. I ask the students what evidence they have to say that the Tooth Fairy is real? The E may not change a child’s point of view, but they become quite discriminating about which evidence they will believe. The E is a most valuable tool for teaching reading comprehension. The students find evidence

in the story to support their responses. Prior to using the evidence in teaching reading, students would give me responses that were not supported in the story. Since I started using E in p4c I have noticed an improvement in their reading responses.

E also stands for example. We may ask for examples when we don’t know what someone means by... We also ask students to give examples of things that are real. Generating examples also helps us compare and understand concepts and even develop criteria. If we ask children for examples of their favorite toys, we can compare what they like about these toys. We can then develop criteria for a good toy. Example can also help disprove something. Do you have an example of a talking dog? If there are no examples, perhaps it doesn’t exist.

C–Is there a counter example? Counter examples are another way of disproving or expanding ideas. For instance, a student may make a statement like “strangers are scary looking.” Asking the students if there is a counter example: “Are there strangers that aren’t scary looking?” enables students to delve deeper into understanding a concept (in this case the concept of stranger).

The tools from the Tool Kit transfer to other content areas. One of my former students once stated, “In a paragraph we need to have examples and evidence for our topic sentence.” In our reading response, we look for evidence to support our answers. We use the Tool Kit in science, social studies, writing, and I’m sure you can find other uses. The Good Thinkers Tool Kit helps students become discriminating thinkers. They are learning to think for themselves and not just taking someone’s word on faith or without reason. It is a way to examine inquiry. For me, it is the heart of the inquiry process.

#9 p4c teaches students to effectively communicate.

In the p4c circle, students learn to take turns during a discussion. They need to listen to each other. They ask for clarification (What do you mean by that?). They also learn to disagree without arguing. Prior to using p4c in my classroom, second grade disagreements were usually of the “yes it is; no it’s not” variety, often ending with “I’m not your friend, any more.” With p4c students realize that there are a range of different perspectives. Differing points of view are valued and make the discussion more interesting. Students

can be heard saying “I disagree because...” or “I agree because...” or “Do you mean...” They also change their minds based on the discussion. I’ve had second graders say “At first I thought..., but now I think...” or “I don’t know what to think—my head is spinning (from all the different perspectives)” Wow! Perhaps our world leaders need to sit in a p4c circle.

#10 p4c Hawai‘i is student centered.

In Plain Vanilla, the students formulate inquiries based on their interests. The class then votes on the inquiry topic for discussion. The students call on each other. Many times people from the university will sit in our circle. The students do not automatically call on them, calling upon their peers instead.

p4c doesn’t preach. A former student would keep things he “found.” He told me: “Finders keepers, losers weepers.” In a p4c circle students shared how they felt when they lost something. They talked about returning things they found and how happy and grateful the person was. In the end, I noticed him returning things he found on the floor. I believe that what his classmates had shared made an impression on him. I don’t think he would have paid attention if it had come from me.

Finally, p4c “reshuffles the deck,” as Dr. J so eloquently puts it. Students use the Tool Kit and share their insights. Oftentimes we find that it is the most “philosophical” students are also the ones who have poor academic skills. How well someone adds and subtracts has little correlation with how logical or insightful they are. I have been impressed with comments from my lowest readers, autistic students, English language learners (ELL students), and every other kind of learner. p4c also gives the rest of us an insight into how these children think.

These are the things I love about p4c. I recommend you try it. It helps to have support. If it weren’t for Dr. J and Chip, I would’ve given up before I really started. It is also great to have other teachers to talk to, and share with. I always learn from watching Dr. J, Dr. Benjamin Lukey, or my colleagues who join me to facilitate a p4c session. Also, it is great to have a pair of fresh eyes. Sometimes I don’t appreciate that my students are thinking like the great philosophers until Dr. J, Dr. Ben, or a philosophy graduate student visitor points it out to me. So if any of this resonates with you, contact Dr. J or Waikīkī School.