Philosophy in the Classroom: Teaching How to Teach Philosophy

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Abstract

Historically, philosophy as a subject has been limited to college students and professional academic philosophers. The Philosophy for Children (P4C) program started by Matthew Lipman and others aims to cultivate intellectual curiosity and philosophical questioning among pre-college students equipping them to participate in democratic society. Our Aggie Research Project in collaboration with P4C Texas and the Texas A&M Office of Public Partnership and Outreach aims to introduce diverse undergraduates interested in education to the theoretical foundations of P4C and offers hands on experience in P4C pedagogy by providing quality community service to local schools in the Bryan-College Station (BCS) area.

Figure 1: High school students engaging in P4C at the Aggie School of Athens Summer Camp 2016. Photo credit: Texas A&M.

Figure 2: Middle school students designing their "ideal school" at the Aggie School of Athens Summer Camp 2016. Photo credit: Texas A&M.

Objectives

Our Aggie Research Project has the following objectives:

1) To introduce undergraduate participants from various academic backgrounds to the theoretical foundations of Philosophy for Children (P4C) and the philosophy of childhood;
2) To train undergraduate participants in methods of P4C pedagogy;
3) To provide quality community service by engaging in P4C at local BCS schools.

Background

Historically, philosophers have held that children were incapable of philosophical thought (e.g. Plato 1968:216; Aristotle 1999:3; Matthews 1994). To this day, exposure to philosophy before college is relatively rare in the US. Nevertheless, during the 1960s, Matthew Lipman and colleagues developed the Philosophy for Children (P4C) curriculum and in 1974 founded the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair University. Over the past few decades P4C programs have been instituted across the globe at various universities, including Texas A&M.

P4C initiatives began at Texas A&M when P4C Texas was founded in 2015 by Dr. Claire Katz, Associate Dean of Faculties, Murray and Celeste Fasken Chair in Distinguished Teaching, and Professor of Philosophy. Through P4C Texas, Dr. Katz coordinates the Fasken Pedagogy workshops for Texas educators interested in P4C. Dr. Katz also directs an annual summer camp for teenagers interested in philosophy: the Aggie School of Athens. In addition to its outreach at schools in the local BCS community, the P4C program offers undergraduate students the opportunity to be trained in and facilitate P4C. Through the Philosophy in the Classroom Aggie Research Project, students have the unique opportunity to learn P4C pedagogy, methodology, and facilitate P4C sessions strengthening their own teaching abilities and strengthening relationships between Texas A&M and the community.

P4C Texas Mission Statement

P4C Texas is dedicated to fulfilling Texas A&M's mission as a land-grant university by bringing the Philosophy for Children program to pre-college classrooms in the local community.

Methodology

The goal of P4C is to develop a community of philosophical inquiry (COI), a concept emerging out of the philosophies of John Dewey and Charles Peirce. The COI emphasizes that knowledge is both socially embedded and contingent, empowering students to investigate conceptual problems collaboratively. In a COI, pre-college students are generally presented with a "stimulus" such as a book, video clip, game, piece of art or music, or other activity. Students then generate questions inspired by the stimulus, and from these questions, a framework for discussion by the COI is formed. The COI typically votes on one or more questions to discuss and the discussion is facilitated by a P4C practitioner, e.g. a faculty, graduate student, or undergraduate facilitator (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). Discussion is sometimes framed as a game (see Table 2), and proceeds according to age-appropriate rules and procedures (see Table 1), stipulated by the facilitator or sometimes crowd-sourced from the students themselves to help them develop intellectual autonomy.

Table 1: How We Do Philosophy! (Wartenberg 2014:45)
1. We think about what we heard.
2. We answer the questions as clearly as we can.
3. We listen carefully and quietly, with our hands down, to what someone is saying.
4. We decide if we agree or disagree.
5. We think about why we agree or disagree.
6. When it's our turn, we say whether we agree or not and why.
7. We respect what everyone says.
8. We all have valuable comments to make.
9. We have fun thinking together.

Figure 3: Middle school students using a piece by philosopher Paolo Freire as a stimulus for discussion at the Aggie School of Athens Summer Camp 2016. Photo credit: Texas A&M.

Table 2: "Moves" in the Game of Philosophy (Wartenberg 2014:38)
1. Present a real example of the abstract issue being discussed.
2. State your position on an issue – i.e. answer a question that has been asked in a clear manner after taking time to think.
3. Support your position with reasons.
4. Figure out if you agree or disagree with what has been said.
5. Present a counterexample to a claim that has been proposed.
6. Put forward a revised version of a claim in light of criticism.

Sample P4C Activity: Three Questions

One sample P4C activity is called "Three Questions" (Shapiro 2012:25-28). In this activity, the stimulus is a picture book (Muth 2002, see Figure 4) based on Tolstoy 2018. In the short story, a boy seeks the answers to his three most important questions about life.

1. When is the best time to do things?
2. Who is the most important one?
3. What is the right thing to do?

After reading the story together, participants contribute what they each believe to be their three most important questions, (see Table 3 for examples). Participants must then vote on which three of all the questions contributed are the most important. Participants typically disagree on which questions are most important and must offer reasons for retaining or deleting a question. The remaining three questions are those which the group as a whole finds most important.
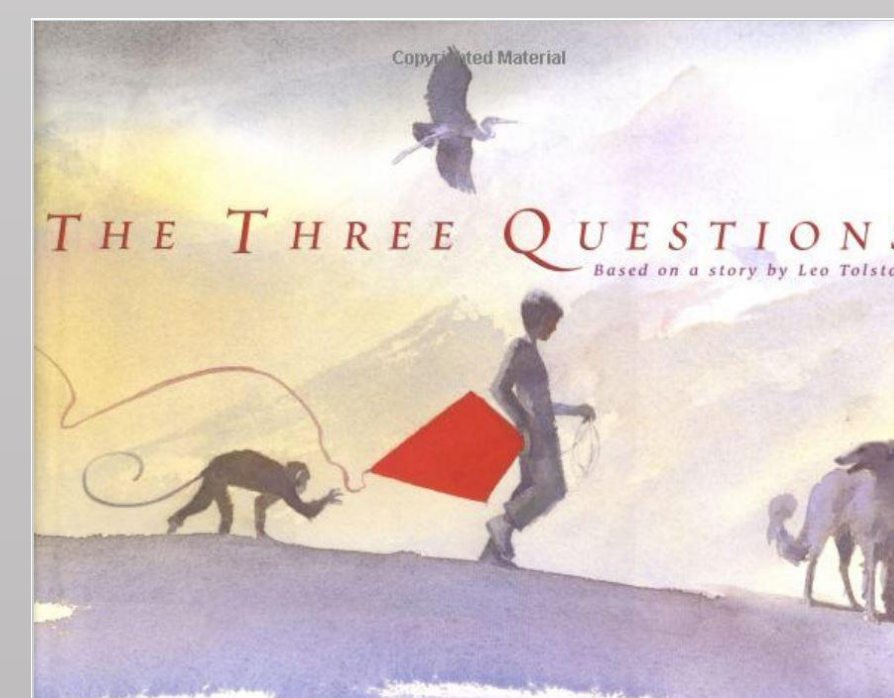

Figure 4: *The Three Questions* by John Muth based on the story by Leo Tolstoy.

Table 3: Examples of Students' Three Questions		
Is a "good" action good if it's done for the wrong reason? ●	Is time travel a thing? ●	What do we deserve? ●
What makes (human) life truly satisfying? ●	What's the best way to correct others? ●	How did I get here? ●
Where do I go? ●	Who(m) are we to correct? ●	Can I just not…? ●
Why am I here? ● ● ●	What's the goal of correction? ●	What comes after life? ● ●
What is justice? ● ●	Are we the only intelligent life? ●	Does perfection exist? ●
What do I desire? ● ●	What makes things fair or unfair? ●	What is beauty? ●
What's the best way to carry out the revolution? ●	What is a friend? ● ●	Are "right" and "wrong" real? ● ●
Will the revolution succeed? ●	What is companionship? ●	Who am I? ●
What's the meaning of life? ● ●	Why are we so obsessed with time? ●	Will I ever be enduringly happy? ●
How do you know where to go? ● ●	What was at the beginning of it all? ●	What is happiness? ●
Are we in a simulation? ● ●	What is time? ●	Do we actually perceive reality (as it is)? ●
Is there a God? ● ●	Are we owed explanations? ●	Is it all a dream? ● ●
Why do we smell? ●	Why do we care about things? ● ●	How do we know what we know? ●

Color Key: ●=Metaphysical, ●=Epistemological, ●=Ethical/Moral, ●=Aesthetic, ●=Axiological, ●=Socio-Political, ●=Philosophy of religion/theology ●=Non-philosophical (e.g. scientific, psychological, historical)

Table 4: Our Group's Final Three Most Important Questions		
What's the meaning of life? ● ●	Are "right" and "wrong" real? ●	How did I get here? ●

Table 5: The Three Fundamental Questions of Philosophy according to Immanuel Kant (1998:677)		
What can I know? ●	What must I do? ●	What may I hope for? ●

Table 3 shows the questions generated by our group of undergraduate research participants during a sample session. Colored dots indicate the philosophical domain to which a question (arguably) belongs. They show that many questions that are not initially or straightforwardly philosophical can be interpreted in a philosophical way. Table 4 shows the final three questions our group determined were most important to us at the time. Table 5 by contrast shows which three questions the philosopher Immanuel Kant argued were the most important in philosophy. The overlap in kinds of question between Tables 4 and 5 show that even with no formal philosophical education, undergraduates and people in general are interested in the kinds of questions professional philosophers ask.

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Acknowledgements & Contact

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