An Introduction to Philosophy for Children

R. Graham Oliver

"It is often said that we should teach children how to learn, but it is rare to find an explanation of how this should be done. Teaching people how to do philosophy, however, is to teach them how to inquire."

Graham Oliver
School of Education
University of Waikato

It is easy to appreciate the common perception that philosophy, as a field of study, is difficult, dry, abstract and remote from the concerns of everyday life. As an undergraduate choosing courses, I held these views myself. I had two major impressions as I browsed the university catalogue. Philosophy seemed to have a lot to do with logic, and I was barely adept at simple arithmetic. Ethics? What could be said about that? Wasn't that just personal and subjective? How could *that* be improved by reading or talking about it?

What was most telling for me, however, was the impression that if philosophy had any importance or relevance to anything, it would be visible in some way outside a university arts department. Indeed, when we did address educational ideas in my teacher training, or my undergraduate study of education, it was the study of something that had already been completed. We weren't expected to have and develop a philosophical life of our own. The news media did not ever report philosophical inventions at all, let alone in the way it reported scientific discoveries. Philosophy, like the writings of the New Testament, was over. It had been done.

My own understanding changed radically when I met up with philosophy at the graduate level, and had come to realise that my primary school teaching was fraught with problems which could only be philosophical. Here, with Ivan Snook, the approach to philosophy was entirely different. We were taught not merely to study philosophy, but to do it. The difference is startling. Instead of philosophy being about 'ideas out there', developed by people much wiser than ourselves, we discovered that we all had philosophies, and that they could be improved. Philosophy was about us. Indeed, when we returned to study the great thinkers, we were now likely to find that we are participating in the "Great Dialogue" of the history of philosophy, since our own understanding and point of view became important and prominent. When I got the chance, I too began to teach the process rather than the ideas, and as I did so in the context where we reflect upon education, I was amazed at how much we came to learn about life. No wonder that, for the ancients, philosophy and education were so intimately bound together. I began to get an inkling of why they thought it a life-saving enterprise, and why the philosophical process creates a community of friends. I was aware of Mathew Lipman's 'Philosophy for Children' enterprise, and wished that more people would promote it more vigorously in New Zealand. I was, however, wary of the word 'philosophy', making sure that the word did not occur in the titles of my courses, because it might put people off. I think I was wrong. The place of philosophy needs to be more widely understood, and not thought of as just an academic exercise. If we fail to recognise that our very lives depend upon good philosophy, we will sell education far too short.

In the early 1970s, Mathew Lipman left a philosophy post at Columbia University to found a programme of 'philosophy for children' at Montclair College in New Jersey. His philosophy for children programme now runs in some six thousand U.S. schools. A major boost in interest came as a result of the screening of the documentary 'Socrates for Six-year-olds', an episode in the

'Transformers' series.
Internationally there are university centres for philosophy for children in such diverse places as Brazil and Iceland, Nigeria and South Korea. Australia is the other major English-speaking country where interest has been widespread, with a national federation of five State associations. A Centre for Philosophy for Children exists under the ACER, and is well represented by Laurance Splitter. Many European countries have traditions of teaching philosophy in secondary schools, and countries such as Finland, Austria, Italy, Spain and Switzerland have organisations affiliated with the Philosophy for Children movement. Indeed, non-English-speaking Spain and Brazil have the largest participation in philosophy for children outside the U.S.[1]

Learning to do philosophy depends upon participation in a group. The student learns to internalise group processes, so that the invention, analysis, criticism and clarification which is the to-and-fro of the group becomes something they eventually replicate in their heads. The mental discipline which we acquire in this way is very much dependent on the discipline to which the group submits. As this discipline becomes philosophical, we each learn to do philosophy.

Lipman describes this special kind of group we should seek as a 'community of inquiry'. Communities of inquiry can take all kinds of disciplinary forms, and Lipman clearly thinks that education should involve communities of inquiry in all sorts of subject matter, but his first interest is in philosophical communities of inquiry. What distinguishes a community of inquiry from a conversation is that the former is a dialogue that makes progress with a question or issue, whereas the latter need not

An effective philosophical community of inquiry would have the following characteristics:

1. It has to be a community of mutual respect, in which all participants' contributions are equally worthy of consideration.
2. It has to be a community of trust, in which all can feel safe in the knowledge that no contribution will be an occasion of ridicule, now or in the future.
3. It has to be a community of courage, in which there is mutual support for questioning views which seem obviously true, or which make life comfortable. It also has to be an environment where participants feel able to offer 'odd', 'risky', or half-formed proposals knowing that others will be patient, and/or lend help in transforming a weak proposal into a strong one. There must be courage, also, to submit ideas to the criticism of others, without the danger that the person, and not just the idea, will be up for evaluation.

Correlatively, participants must be willing to:

1. entertain ideas which they may feel hostility toward, or which seem silly
2. support others in the development of their ideas, and to aid others whose ideas are not being heard
3. play the Devil's advocate — asking questions which should be asked, even if they go against our own views.
4. persist in the face of their own confusion, and in the face of group confusion
5. resist the desire for closure, or 'answers'.
6. ask questions, propose ideas and provide illustrations
7. illustrate points with examples as required.
8. be patient.

These requirements are, indeed, as demanding as they seem, but when pursued under favourable conditions, a group will develop its own discipline as the benefits of doing so begin to be perceived by participants. It is hard to overestimate the enthusiasm which can be tapped in a group which begins to work favourably, and the fact that participants 'own' and regulate their own community is vital to its emergent authority. The potential that a community of inquiry can realise is of very considerable educational importance, but creating one is no mean feat. Before we explore the challenge that creating these dialogues involves, we should pay more attention to the point of creating one.

Why create communities of inquiry in schools? I can think of three reasons: to pass much of the responsibility for learning back to the learner:

- to enhance the abilities of learners to find their own best ways of deciding how to live;
- to equip learners for participation in genuine democracy;
- and — yes — to enable them to make better contributions in business and employment, for their own sakes, and for the sakes of us all.

There is also a fourth reason:

- to meet the curriculum objective of developing critical thinking.

There is a requirement here that falls on institutions participating in the state school system. It is, however, better to do it because it is right, rather than merely because it is required. This should move us to seek a sophisticated understanding of critical thinking. Its value will, I think, be subsumed under one or more of the purposes outlined below.

It is often said that we should teach children how to learn, but it is rare to find an explanation of how this should be done. Teaching people how to do philosophy, however, is to teach them how to inquire. Not only that, but it involves thought about thought, meta-thinking, or higher-order thinking. The point is to enable people to become owners of their own thoughts, values and principles, rather than simply being the carriers of other people's. It is to enable people to take responsibility for these things — responsibility for how well founded or tested they are. This is to become self-conscious about learning and to become skilled in evaluating it and seeking what is appropriate. It would make sense of

the idea of 'learning how to learn'. In one sense, there is no need to learn how to learn — we are inevitably doing that from our life's beginnings. The harder and more interesting thing is to be capable of identifying what is worth learning and to reject learning that is valueless or harmful. It is also to know how to seek out and master *worthwhile* learning, and to be able to establish its warrant. Philosophy provides the tools to tease these processes apart.

I would suggest that the most important single purpose of education is to enhance people's abilities to seek for themselves good answers to the question 'what is good living', and to equip them to develop a worthwhile life for themselves in the best way. If education is not ultimately about living well, then I am against it. Schooling does not have a good record of dealing with this task. Indeed, some might want to accuse schools of contributing to the invisibility of this question. Schools could make a significant start at repairing the situation, however, by embracing philosophy in the recognition that the question of living well is one of philosophy's two defining questions. With community concerns about problems like drugs, violence and teen suicide, a programme that would equip young people to think effectively about such matters should be explored seriously.

A critical and constructive citizenry is essential to any worthwhile democracy, and it should be obvious that there is a close parallel between the community of inquiry and effective democratic processes. Indeed, in John Dewey's understanding of a democracy, properly conceived, is that of an intelligent, problem-solving community. He felt that an education consistent with democracy would, of necessity, be democratic. [3] Many people have difficulty in seeing how to translate this idea into schools as we understand them, but a philosophical community of inquiry in school is easier to imagine, and many of them already exist. What better place to start?

Purposes such as learning how to learn, or to encourage inquiry into good living, or to make an educational contribution to democracy are, in my view, by far the most important purposes in education. This is not so in the conventional wisdom. What matters most, on this view, is getting jobs, and improving the economy. Perhaps if philosophy cannot show benefit here as well, it will have a hard time winning support.

"The abilities to analyse an argument, to examine it critically, and to throw up alternatives are increasingly valued in knowledge-based professions and in industries that require intelligence and flexibility in order to compete."

There have, of course, been many claims that employees with philosophy qualifications are favoured by many employers because they have been 'taught to think'. The abilities to analyse an argument, to examine it critically, and to throw up alternatives are increasingly valued in knowledge-based professions and in industries that require intelligence and flexibility in order to compete. Indeed, as the global economy develops, the only way in which much Western business may be able to maintain high standards of living will be by being out in front, or by marketing effectively to affluent niches. Good qualities of thought will be essential if this is to happen.

Schools are required to develop critical thinking. It would be interesting to know how this requirement is understood, and what steps are being taken to ensure that it happens. Teaching people to think critically requires more than simply teaching them to think, though if critical thinking is not well understood, the latter could be confused for the former. 'That made them think!' may not be a very profound achievement — somewhere just above an inert state. Most of us think a good deal of the time, but this thought may be of limited value. It is the quality of the thought that needs to receive attention.4 How do we assess and refine the quality of thought? By doing philosophy. It seems absurd to adopt some proprietary 'critical thinking' package when the methodologies and contents of a major academic discipline some thousands of years in the making are available to us.

Moreover 'critical thinking', on its own, is decidedly one-legged. Lay people have a point when they think of the word 'critical' as suggesting something negative or destructive. When understood in our context here, 'critical' does not mean 'tearing someone down', it means something more like testing or evaluating. This is just one half of the process of effective thinking, however. There needs to be a promising stock of things to test. There needs to be a constructive, inventive or creative phase. We too easily think of creativity as being on an opposite pole from critical thinking, but in philosophy, the two are married together. It has always been a discipline in which people not only analyse and test ideas, they also offer them. Good thinking is a process of proposing as well as evaluating. In order to avoid a kind of critical sterility, we need both.

Philosophical inquiry, fostered through communities of inquiry, offers enormous potential to our education systems. It offers students a way to grow out of intellectual dependency, to own their own thoughts, and to acquire knowledge for the most genuine of reasons — their own. It offers a way of developing intelligent values, without foisting ours upon them. It offers a safe setting for intercultural dialogue. Surprisingly (in terms of our common perceptions, including those with which I began) it offers ways of connecting more traditional

learning with the lived experience of learners. It offers ways of altering our traditional structures of authority and power for the better, and opening up the possibilities of democracy, without lapsing into anarchy. It offers too much for us to ignore.

It also offers some daunting challenges. Lipman's programme stresses the importance both of an understanding of philosophy, and experience and knowledge of teaching. James Battye at Massey University delivers a diploma in Philosophy for Children for teachers who have a background in both. Yet it is hard to imagine student teachers in sufficient numbers wanting to qualify themselves in philosophy on top of, or in addition to, their teaching qualifications in order for all pupils to be offered philosophy as a routine matter — in the primary school at least.

On the other hand there is no obvious reason why teachers should not attempt to improve their skills at facilitating discussion by attempting to create philosophical communities of inquiry. They could also pursue their own studies in philosophy. The danger would lie in claiming to be doing philosophy while actually doing much less. It would be very easy indeed to mistake an interesting discussion for a community of inquiry, and there is a danger of bringing the enterprise into disrepute. Some of my students have tried with children what they perceive to be the process, and have been very excited at the results. The excitement may, however, have been at the discovery of what we might hear from children if we listened to them with more patience and humility than we normally do. This change in attitude can only be educationally beneficial, but it may not be philosophy. Some experience may be needed to pick up on the philosophical moment and to see philosophical progress. It will also be important for teachers to have engaged in the philosophical process with regard to their own beliefs. It is hard to see what other people are taking for granted, when we take such things for granted ourselves. It will be difficult to encourage an effective 'devil's advocacy' if our own views have not been seriously challenged. At a minimum, some connection probably needs to be made with someone who knows what they are doing where teaching philosophy is concerned.

There are other challenges for the would-be teacher. Being able to hand over most of the authority to the group — to depend on *their* consent that we should speak — may be quite difficult for some teachers. It can also be difficult to leave a discussion to take its own course when 'we can see just what it needs'. We might worry about an important moment being lost, but it is so much better when the participants see the reasons for themselves through working with each other.

There is also the fear that some teachers might have about where the discussion might lead, and the position they will then be in if they have relinquished some traditional authority. The truth is that many of us fear free thought, and have feared it to the extent that we have not risked it ourselves. We are also reluctant to trust our young people in case they make the 'wrong' decision, or come to the 'wrong' conclusion. It always concerns me that this seems somehow to imply that the 'right' decisions might not be arrived at through a process of sustained and disciplined reasoning. How much danger there is here partly depends upon how well we can trust the processes we have built, and how much time we have got to do justice to the question. In order to work, the process must involve the creation of a very ethical community. As we build it, and see it working (with a critical eye), and as we see our students acknowledging reasons, we will learn to trust. We too must learn this. It may not be too bold to say that many unfortunate things that young people do occur because they do not think very well. We might be surprised at how thoughtful they can be once we learn to listen, and give them the chance.

Notes

1. Useful links can be found at: http://www.p4c.net/
   A number of articles by Lipman are archived at: http://www.philosophynews.com/whip/index.htm#p4c
2. Lipman, M. (1991). *Thinking in Education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education.* New York: Macmillan and Co.
4. Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think.* Lexington MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 3-16Rethinking the relationship between Classroom Research and Educational Practice: The ERUDITE research case studies in Teaching, Learning and Inclusion.

W3PC Philosophy for Children on the World Wide Web

whip What's happening in philosophy
Regular updates from the Philosophy News Service
www.philosophynews.com/whip

WHiP Archive

This section features regular updates about the most recent and important developments in philosophy. Following are areas for which we have writers. If you would like to join our volunteer staff of WHiP writers, please send information about yourself to WHiP@philosophynews.com. (Please click here to learn about other ways in which you might contribute to this website)

Applied Ethics
Early Modern Philosophy
Health Care Ethics
Philosophical Counseling
Philosophical Logic
Philosophy for Children
Philosophy of Mind
Philosophy of Psychiatry
Philosophy of Religion
Philosophy of Sport
Political Philosophy