

# Ethics and the Community of Inquiry: education for deliberative democracy

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Gilbert Burgh, Terri Field & Mark Freakley  
 Melbourne: Thomson, 2006, pp. xii + 235  
 ISBN 0170122190 (pb)

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This book made me think, which is always a good sign. Unfortunately it did not always make me think about what the book was meant to make me think about, but that is not necessarily a bad sign, and in any event the author can never be in total control of the reader. I shall begin with what the book does talk about and try to leave my own meanderings until later, although I suspect they may creep in from time to time.

The book is ambitious in its scope, but the authors clearly set out their aims right at the beginning: 'We propose a philosophy of genuine enquiry to integrate curriculum, teaching and learning and to place deliberative democracy at the centre of education reform' (p. ix). Although it is never made wholly explicit, the education that is being targeted for reform is both primary and secondary, and the book's target audience is comprised of teachers in primary and secondary schools. Having made this opening statement, the rest of the book falls into two roughly equal halves, with the first half justifying this position and the second half giving guidance on how it can be put into practice. 'The guiding idea that informs the practice advocated in this book is that doing philosophy as distinct from learning about philosophy, helps us to understand the ways in which we reason about the world, make decisions and, ultimately, how we should live in it' (p. ix).

(First meandering. What is the important difference between 'doing philosophy' and 'learning about philosophy' that is being referred to here? And could we also, for example, also do history or maths as distinct from learning about history or maths? In short, is this a point specifically about philosophy, or is it a general point that could refer to any subject (or at least many subjects)? And if it only applies to philosophy, why?)

The first half of the book articulates a position that draws heavily on Matthew Lipman and, through him, John Dewey and C.S. Peirce. It is a pity that so many people feel the need to call on the authority of Socrates, and unfortunate that the authors of this book are unable to resist it. They use the term 'Socratic Method' to describe 'a thinking system or method that involves searching for the truth through persistent and thorough questioning' (p. 36). One of the reasons this usage is unfortunate here is because it may easily be confused with 'Socratic Dialogue', a term used to denote a method of philosophical investigation developed by Leonard Nelson with its roots in the very different Kantian tradition. A crucial element the authors emphasise from Peirce is that of fallibilism, the position that we may always be wrong. Although not absolutely requiring it, fallibilism makes a powerful case for collaborative inquiry as the best means for seeking out truth since it is generally easier to see the flaws in the positions of others than in one's own. In the end this is perhaps the best justification of the community of inquiry available. Whatever its faults, it gives us our best shot at getting things right. And, it might be added, because it is a participatory exercise, it imposes responsibility on those taking part and gives ownership of the outcome.

(Second meandering. The index contains the fascinating entry, 'Socratic Method (thinking)' (p. 234). Where does philosophy fit into this picture? If we are talking about a 'Socratic Method' presumably Socrates is being invoked because we are discussing a method for 'doing philosophy'? But is 'doing philosophy' then just the same as thinking? Or at least the same as thinking well?)

The second half of the book is mainly about how to facilitate a community of inquiry and so is addressed directly to teachers. It covers some fairly obvious ground in a helpful and systematic way. There is advice on how to get a community of inquiry started, how to identify suitable materials for a group to work with, how to intervene and when, what kinds of questions are most constructive and why, and so on. Very importantly, there is also advice on how to bring matters to a close in such a way that maximum benefit is derived from the whole

experience. The last chapter is devoted to a single case study concerning a Queensland primary school. 'The community that is Buranda State School today is a very different one from that in 1996 when the principal was first appointed. The students are achieving excellent academic and social outcomes, the teachers are satisfied and productive in their work, and the parents are happy and supportive' (p. 205). If the proof of the pudding is in the eating and nothing succeeds like success, then if not quite an incontrovertible Q.E.D., this final chapter is nevertheless an impressive testimony to what has gone before.

But it does leave me with some lingering doubts. First, as a general point, the book is generally positive towards conflict on the basis that it feeds the dynamics of debate. This is an interesting idea, but in a genuine democracy there is always the problem of how to deal with recalcitrant minorities. What about those who cannot or will not agree? Although I have not stressed it here, the book is substantially concerned with specifically ethical inquiry, and it tends to be on ethical issues that differences are sharpest and least easily resolved. Was Buranda State School a relatively homogenous community?

Secondly, the book gives a lot of good quality background introductory material relating to philosophy. This includes a break down of the different areas of philosophy and the issues they address, as well as some basic logic. It is also mentioned that all the teachers at Buranda have done in-service training and 'have attained their basic certificate to teach philosophy in the classroom' (p. 199). I have some unease about this, although some of it is simply due to ignorance. I do not know what this basic certificate covers, but the obvious question to ask is whether people equipped with it are qualified to teach children how to 'do philosophy' or how to 'learn about philosophy'. This is where the difference becomes very significant. It may be possible to teach some fundamental logic without much other philosophical background, for example, but to be able to help students 'learn about philosophy' requires a lot more than that. The history of philosophy, for example, contains much of our intellectual heritage, and an understanding of that is not as easily acquired. Of course, it may be argued that as long as people can think straight none of the rest matters, but if that is the case, then let it be argued. And if nothing else, a wider knowledge of philosophy provides valuable insights into directions that have been adjudged to be dead ends and why. I would certainly be concerned if someone armed only with this book were to attempt to teach philosophy in the classroom, unless it were professionally agreed that anyone armed only with a similar book on a different subject was equally entitled to teach maths, history etc. in the same classroom.

This is where I hope it becomes clear that my meanderings were not entirely random or unrelated to the contents of the book. The basic question, it seems to me, concerns what 'philosophy in the classroom' purports to teach. It is interesting to note that at Buranda, 'The students' willingness to tackle and ability to solve open-ended problems, especially in maths, has improved dramatically' (p. 203). It is impossible to be anything other than pleased at this, but difficult to avoid asking what this has to do with philosophy. It is also difficult to avoid asking why this more constructive approach to maths could not simply be integrated into the way in which maths (and not only maths) is taught. And I suspect that a subject taught this way might best be described as having been taught well?

I do not want these comments to be seen as detracting from the value of the book. It contains much that is good and deserves to be widely read and used (in the right hands!). The first half of the book weaves an elegant and persuasive case for the integration of philosophical inquiry and deliberative democracy within education, while the second half clearly benefits from a wealth of practical experience on the part of the authors. My concerns relate to broader issues raised by the book, namely professional standards of philosophy teaching and an understanding of what philosophy is and is not. I am reluctant to see philosophy regarded as something anyone can teach if they can get hold of the right book, or to see 'philosophy' used as a simple synonym for 'thinking well'. They are both rather more than that.

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