

# "BACK TO THE FUTURE" IN PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE: A PLEA FOR CHANGING P4C TEACHER EDUCATION.

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*ABSTRACT: While making P4C much more easily disseminated, short-term weekend and weeklong P4C training programs not only dilute the potential laudatory impact of P4C, they can actually be dangerous. As well, lack of worldwide standards precludes the possibility of engaging in sufficiently high quality research of the sort that would allow the collection of empirical data in support the efficacy of worldwide P4C adoption. For all these reasons, the authors suggest that P4C advocates ought to insist that programs of a minimum of five philosophy courses be accepted as the recognized standard for any teacher to legitimately claim that she is teaching Philosophy for Children.*

## "EDUCATION" AS OPPOSED TO "TRAINING"

There is much merit in attempting to disseminate the ability to run a vibrant Community of Inquiry as is done in typical short-term exposures to P4C methods. There is much merit also in suggesting to teachers that they make use of P4C materials (or those of similar content), as they will serve as an impetus to address philosophical, usually non-empirical, and often real life questions (such as what precisely is wrong with being a bully or is it OK not to speak up in class)—questions not normally addressed in the regular curriculum. Given this short-term “shot-in-the arm” training, it is not far fetched to argue that the ensuing Communities of Inquiry led by such teachers can serve as fertile ground for students to learn a plethora of critical and creative thinking skills, such as patiently and carefully listening to those with whom they disagree, reflectively considering the strength of reasons that they offer in support of their own positions, getting practice in imagining alternatives, to say nothing of the importance of being awakened to the myriad of perplexing issues that populate daily existence.

Nonetheless, despite the potential merits of such training, it can also be argued that, with regard to deep understanding and long-term positive change in students, and with regard to the lasting recognition of P4C as a vital contribution to the education of children around the world, this is not enough. What is missing in too many Philosophy for Children programs, we would argue, is philosophy. And the solution that we would like to propose is a substantial injection of philosophy in the P4C education of teachers, rather than the typical “shot-in-the-arm” training.

## WHAT A NON-PHILOSOPHICAL P4C COI MIGHT LOOK LIKE

We would like to begin by inviting you to imagine what a P4C Community of Inquiry might look like if the facilitator does not know—and the following are just examples—the difference between an empirical and a non-empirical claim, i.e., she doesn’t know that one can’t reason one’s way to answering whether photo radar reduces speeding, or whether keeping pubs open later will reduce binge drinking that appears to be fueled by the pressure of early closures (a recent country-wide experiment in England showed that binge drinking along, with alcohol-related violence, actually went up with extended pub hours).<sup>1</sup> Or if the facilitator doesn’t know the difference between liberty and autonomy and thus is unable to point out that “simply doing what one wants” is not indicative of being the author of one’s action. Or if the facilitator knows nothing of the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions and is thus unable to show that the claims “you will live if you have this operation” and “you will only live if you have this operation” are not equivalent. Or if a facilitator is unfamiliar

with the most common informal fallacies and is thus unable to point out to a student who says that “physicians should never participate in an act of euthanasia because physicians should always do everything in their power to keep patients alive” that s/he is begging the question. Or if a facilitator is completely ignorant of the finally-tuned Kantian argument that autonomy is the ultimate ground for morality, or the Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities that founds our present understanding of different realities for different species, or of the Rawlsian tactic of standing behind a veil of ignorance in order to gain a more unbiased view—and/or if the facilitator has never heard of Hardin’s notion of the tragedy of the commons, of Wittgenstein’s notion of language games, or of Schweitzer’s notion of reverence for life—to say nothing of being ignorant of Plato’s argument in support of separating wealth and power, or Mill’s argument for the importance of freedom of speech, or even Peter Singer’s distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness in trying to maneuver around the complex questions of abortion and animal welfare (Practical Ethics).

### CAN THIS BE REAL PHILOSOPHY?

Can such a P4C COI that is so lacking in philosophical content be called philosophy at all? Yes, of course, some might argue, because, after all, it is utilizing the Socratic Method to investigate exactly the same category of questions that Socrates himself considered, and most philosophers consider Socrates “a real philosopher” even though he makes few, if any, “appeals to authority.” Indeed, many might argue that the strength of P4C lies precisely in piercing through the academic clutter in order to firmly anchor itself in what is really important about philosophy and that is to engage in interpersonal inquiry about real life issues, and to be able to efficiently and effectively attempt to move toward truth on what one inquires about.

So what precisely is the problem? Perhaps an analogy with medicine will help.

### CAN THIS BE REAL MEDICINE?

Medicine at the beginning of the 20th century was far less effective at keeping patients alive than medicine at the beginning of the 21st century. Medicine that was practiced at the beginning of the 20th century, however, was nonetheless “real medicine.” And not only that, there were truths about past medicine that have been lost in medicine’s spectacular drive toward modernization, not the least of which is the perception of the patient as a “real person.” However, to say that much has been lost in medicine’s move forward, is not to argue that we should therefore ignore recent medical advances, nor that we should not insist that medical students access as many good modern medical voices as is possible. Medical students, of course, cannot know it all—there is too much. But they can scaffold on the shoulders of many who have gone before. This, we suggest, is what anyone who claims to teach philosophy ought to be able to do.

### THE METAPHOR

What we are suggesting is that, optimally, all P4C facilitators have a minimum exposure to some of the more common and time-tested philosophical theoretical frameworks. With such a background, a facilitator can then act as a conduit to a whole other non-physically-present community of inquirers who have already exerted lifetimes of effort and energy in trying to clarify and to move toward truth on innumerable pressing human issues. Access to such past inquiry can jump start stalls in philosophical investigation so that modern-day communities need not reinvent the wheel. Surely we would not want our medical students to “try,” and perhaps fail, to reinvent antibiotics. Why then do we want to force our budding philosophers to try, and perhaps fail, to see the differences between, say, consciousness and self-consciousness or liberty and autonomy?

Of course neither of these exercises, i.e., of trying to reinvent medicines or make distinctions of which one is purposefully kept ignorant, would be fruitless. Who knows, maybe if we didn’t tell our medical students about antibiotics, they would come up with the same solution, or better? But maybe not. After all, the scientists who came up with antibiotics were themselves building on past voices. And yes, of course, students and teach-

ers trying to muddle through why our society thinks it's OK to kill cows but not humans might spontaneously articulate Singer's consciousness/self-consciousness distinction, or they might not, or they might simply get so confused that they resort to all kinds of "begging the question" tactics in their desperation to preserve the hegemony of humans.

Surely, we want to argue, the superior tactic is to start our students off within calling distance of the wealth of what our ancestors left to us, and to inspire them to take us further still.

### HOW MUCH AND WHAT KIND?

Of course P4C facilitators cannot learn all or even most philosophy, and we will never—unhappily—be in a position in which Ph. D's in philosophy are teaching in elementary schools. But learning some of the basics is possible, and by learning the basics what we mean is the sort 5-course certification program offered at IAPC. Though our penchant is for including critical thinking, ethics, metaphysics and epistemology, political and social philosophy, and philosophy of education in such a program, we do not believe that what precisely is included is critical. Working with the metaphor of the facilitator introducing a community of past inquirers to the present COI, it probably doesn't matter a whole lot which community of experts one invites. One can imagine an enormous variety of exceptional discussions each with a huge assortment of absent participants.

On the other hand, given that absent philosophers are going to be asked to engage vicariously in a discussion of topics that are of importance to the present participants, we suggest that the philosophy taught to future P4C facilitators be of a "practically oriented brand" rather than the typical academic approach that is standard in history of philosophy courses.

### A PRACTICALLY ORIENTED BRAND OF PHILOSOPHY.

We are hardly the first to suggest that philosophy ought to be imparted in a more practically oriented fashion, and so, in honour of the intergenerational professionally-infused dialogue herein suggested, let us briefly speak to other voices who have advocated a similar approach.

In his work entitled *Politics*, Aristotle makes a clear distinction between theoretical and more practically oriented studies. Specifically, he distinguishes between the life of sensuality and desire (later called the *vita voluptuosa*), the political life (*bios politicos* or later the *vita activa*) and the life of the philosopher (*bios theoreticos* or later *vita contemplativa*).<sup>2</sup> Much later, Hannah Arendt refers to this early distinction of Aristotle and defines the *vita activa*, or action, as one of the three basic activities of human life corresponding to the three basic conditions of human existence (the other two being labour and work).<sup>3</sup> According to Arendt, public action (which includes speech) is grounded in the human condition of plurality, and is the only enterprise by which humans can disclose their identity and uniqueness to one another.<sup>4</sup> Thus, though Arendt believed that we must introduce students to the already existing world, she believed that the introduction should be in the name of genuine renewal<sup>5</sup> -that we should teach in a way that cultivates the political and moral imaginations of our students so that they are able to see the world from the other's point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Gadamer complains, in his famous work *Truth and Method*, that a primarily theoretical orientation prompts us to see philosophical theories as self-enclosed entities that are safely dead so that they no longer concern us. He says of us that we have "truly abandoned the expectation of finding, in the legacy of the text, a truth that is valid and comprehensible for oneself."<sup>7</sup> As an antidote, Gadamer suggests that we adopt a hermeneutic approach to texts that will require of us that we engage in a genuine dialogue with past thinkers and that, as a result, we will come to see history as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, i.e., as a force that can impact on who we are or who we become. It is critical to keep in mind, here, that such a dialogue, i.e., one that is hermeneutic, is characterized by the fact that, instead of just trying to understand what another is attempting to say, that, as well, we attempt to create a dialogue between that person's perspective and our own. Thus, within the context of accessing the works of past

thinkers, a hermeneutic analysis would lead to a ‘merging of horizons’ between the past and the present, i.e., the past remains relevant and applicable for the present questions and problems.

Similar to Gadamer, Rorty believes that philosophy ought to be a dialogue. Building on this idea, he distinguishes between systematic philosophy and edifying philosophy.<sup>8</sup> According to Rorty, a systematic philosopher tries to construct a consistent eternal system through which to reveal an external and static truth, whereas an edifying philosopher deconstructs this system so that something new can arise.

American Pragmatist, John Dewey, argues that philosophy has an important social responsibility in a democratic society. For him philosophy ought to be "an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habits in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life." For Dewey, then, philosophy ought to be a "theory of education in its most general phases" and that therefore the "reconstruction of philosophy, of education, and of social ideals and methods thus go hand in hand."<sup>9</sup> Dewey goes on to quite specifically say of philosophy that, like science, "it must assume a practical nature; it must become operative and experimental."<sup>10</sup> In so doing, Dewey echoes fellow American Pragmatist Charles Saunders Pierce who argued before him that philosophy ought to mirror science by anchoring its methodology in genuine inquiry, and that such inquiry can only be genuine if it is undertaken in the face of "real and living doubt."<sup>11</sup> And finally, though certainly not least—though perhaps most relevant—Matt Lipman, founder of Philosophy for Children, in responding to this Pierce/Deweyan call for genuine inquiry in the face of real and living doubt, situated the Community of Inquiry at its pedagogical center, and, as well, insisted that students, not the text nor teacher, decide what topic they want to discuss thus ensuring that the issue under inquiry was of genuine relevance.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, Lipman suggests to us, in spades, an obvious format for the philosophical education of P4C teachers.

### MIRRORING THE MESSAGE

This overview of philosophers who advocate a more practically oriented education thus mirrors the central message of this paper. That is, this overview not only demonstrates that there have already been a number of voices that form a strong chorus in support of the thesis that philosophy taught to P4C teachers ought to be of a “practically oriented brand,” i.e., that students be required to routinely engage in a dialogue about present day issues that are of core relevance for personal or political decisions and action, but as well, because of the richness that even this short overview brings to the topic, in and of itself, it demonstrates how impoverished a dialogue can be if it fails to engage the voices of those who have already invested a considerable amount of time, thought, and energy in trying to parse though the issue at hand. This short overview, also, interestingly, suggests that this very issue, i.e., theoretical versus practical forms of education, would, in and of itself, be a fruitful exploration for anyone interested in bringing philosophy into the classroom, and hence would serve well as the matrix for one of the courses designed for P4C educators. And finally, with regard to this short paper itself, it is at least plausible to suggest that, had the authors been completely deaf to past relevant voices, classifying this paper as “philosophical” might very well be problematic, just as, we suggest, it is problematic to support the claim that Philosophy for Children is really “philosophy” if both students and teachers remain utterly ignorant of virtually all of the powerful philosophical messages that form the *Lebenswelt* of that academic discipline.<sup>13</sup>

### THE DOWNSIDE OF THE “SHOT-IN-THE ARM.”

In arguing that it is important to give P4C teachers a firm grounding in philosophy, we want to emphasize that we are not simply making the case that this is the optimal route. We are also making the case that it may be very dangerous to stick to the easy-road quick-fix attitude with regard to philosophy-free P4C training, and the danger is not just in the resulting poorer grade of discussion. The danger rather is much more serious. What can happen in P4C COI’s with an unphilosophically educated facilitator is that poor reasoning may very well be reinforced. How could it not be if a teacher doesn’t know how to recognize an *ad hominem* attack flung frequently by the attention-seeking “smart aleck” of the group? How could it not be if s/he doesn’t understand that it is a fallacy to presume that answers to difficult questions are best found by adopting the “mean” position?

How could it not be if the teacher is so intent on having her students adopt what she perceives to be the only legitimate point of view that she implicitly sends the message that what reasoning is all about is to first intuit the answer and then marshal reasons in its support, rather than truly following reason wherever it leads?

And aside from inadvertently reinforcing poor reasoning, if dangerously out-of-control COI's are occurring unbeknownst to the well intentions of P4C experts, the possibility of the P4C movement ever being able to empirically demonstrate the enormous benefit of well-run philosophically-backed P4C COI's will forever slip through our grasp. Or worse, in trying to gather empirical evidence, we or others may gather data that "proves" not only that the medicine doesn't work, but that it actually sickens the patient, though all along the medicine under investigation, unbeknownst to all, was counterfeit. We must, if we are ever to show that P4C not only works but works beautifully, be able to guarantee that everyone in the experimental group receives the same medicine—or at least approximately—and that it is real stuff, and not just a placebo or worse a poison.

### ADOPTING A HIGHER STANDARD

We recognize the downside of adopting a higher standard. Having worldwide certificate 5-course P4C philosophy programs—which is what we are recommending—will, by comparison, devalue weekend and weeklong courses, though perhaps not lethally. One can still argue that there is merit in learning a little about being a P4C COI facilitator, as long as in the process, one is trying to seduce those who get "bitten" by the method into acquiring a much greater wealth of philosophical education, and as long as one makes it clear that, without philosophy, this is not philosophy.

The big upside is that once a higher standard has been adopted—with an emphasis on both higher and standard, we will put ourselves in a position to do real research and hence to collect the kind of empirically based data by which we can finally convince the powers that be that P4C is a not-to-be-missed invaluable educational opportunity.

We are not making the obviously erroneously claim that investigation into the benefits of various kinds of education can be as precise as those in the physical sciences. But as Aristotle said, we must bring to the topic what precision the topic admits.<sup>14</sup> Our suggestion, therefore, is that we ensure that the medicine is sufficiently real and sufficiently strong to make a difference, and that it has sufficient quality controls that we can make the claim that the results are from the same medicine, and, therefore, that we will all be beneficiaries of world-wide inoculation.

#### Endnotes

1. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/05/MNQ4VDCAI.DTL> <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/03/04/britain-alcohol.html?ref=rss>
2. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1332b2, 1333a30ff and 1332b32; see 1333a30-33 about the life of the philosopher; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X.
3. Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
4. *Ibid.* 175.
5. Gordon, M. "Hannah Arendt and Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered." *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*. Ed. Mordechai Gordon. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001. 63.
6. Euben, P. "Hannah Arendt on Politicizing the University and Other Clichés." *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*. Ed. Mordechai Gordon. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001. 194.
7. Wahrheit hat man den Anspruch grundsätzlich aufgegeben, in der Überlieferung für einen selber gültige und verständliche Wahrheit zu finden." (Gadamer, H.-G. *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tuebingen: Mohr Verlag, 1990, 309).
8. Rorty, R. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 365ff.
9. Dewey, J. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Free Press,

1966. 328-331.

10. Dewey, J. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon, 1948. 121.
11. Peirce, C.S. "The Fixation of Belief." *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover Publications, 1955. 11.
12. "There is good reason to think that the model of each and every classroom . . . is the community of inquiry. By inquiry, of course, I mean perseverance in self-corrective exploration of issues that are felt to be both important and problematic." Lipman, M. *Philosophy Goes to School*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. 20.
13. Habermas J. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. (German text: 1981.) "This lifeworld (Lebenswelt) is bounded by the totality of interpretations presupposed by the members as background knowledge." 13. "Subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld. Their lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions." 70.
14. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 3. "Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts."

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