Managing Philosophical Discussions

Did we manage it that time? Did that discussion really count as a philosophical one — a discussion which is cumulative, which builds, and in which definite progress is made?[1] These are questions I wrestle with regularly as I work with three classes of fifth and sixth graders at Edinburgh School in Montreal. Some discussions are clearly better than others, but are they truly philosophical? Are the children learning to see them as such? Sometimes it can be hard to tell.

While struggling both to increase the incidence of truly philosophical discussions and to heighten the children's awareness of the special and demanding qualities of such discussions, I have come to realize that the success of the enterprise is not wholly dependent on the 'art' of the teacher. Indeed there are many factors which can sabotage the best teacher's efforts. And that is why we must consider 'managing' philosophical discussions in a quite different sense: we must consider devising 'management strategies.'

A year and a half of doing philosophy with my pilot group has yielded a number of management strategies which grow out of the children's own critical reflections on the quality of their discussions — strategies which clearly help. I offer them here not so much in the belief that they represent any particular ideal for they may or may not suit other classroom settings. Rather I hope, with this description, to encourage others to identify and share what has worked best in their experience.

The strategies outlined range from the concrete (useful classroom devices *for* discussions) to the abstract (useful procedures *in* discussions). All seem to contribute in different but important ways to 'managing it' more often.

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One piece of classroom management equipment which has been very valuable in philosophy sessions is a deck of name cards. The name of each participant is written on a small index card. (Usually the children insist that there be a card with the teacher's name on it as well and visitors, who are always invited to participate, have been known to have cards made for them, too.) These cards have as many uses as can be invented for them and their appeal is the game-like quality they lend to the activity at hand. The biggest advantage, however, is fairness. The cards do not play favourites and time permitting, everyone can have a turn in random order. The children like the cards because of this fairness and often it is they who suggest their use.

One of the important principles in philosophical activities is that oral participation should be voluntary. The name cards not only respect this principle, they make the most of it. It is extremely important to respect the children's right to remain silent during oral activity and one way of doing this with the cards is to establish early the acceptability of saying "Pass" if one's name comes up and one chooses to refrain from contributing. No explanation is necessary and after awhile the children come to understand that it is indeed a legal and acceptable move.

There is an important distinction to be made here however, for there may be two quite different reasons for remaining silent. Group dynamics can be such that there may be children who have something important to say, who recognize that, and who *want* to participate. But to do so would require 'jumping in' and sometimes quite forcefully because of the element of competition which can prevail among vocal enthusiasts. *That's* the hard part: some may be bursting with a particular insight but the social skill of asserting themselves in the required way may at that moment be out of reach. So they choose not to participate and they lose the opportunity to benefit from other minds endorsing or contributing to their ideas. The name cards can serve these children particularly well for very often they are children who are perfectly willing to speak when addressed. With the cards, the necessity to initiate is removed and they can choose to contribute or not on the basis of whether they have something to say rather than have it be a matter of daring.

The important function of these cards in some activities then is to encourage the children to join in by making participation easy, fun and fair.

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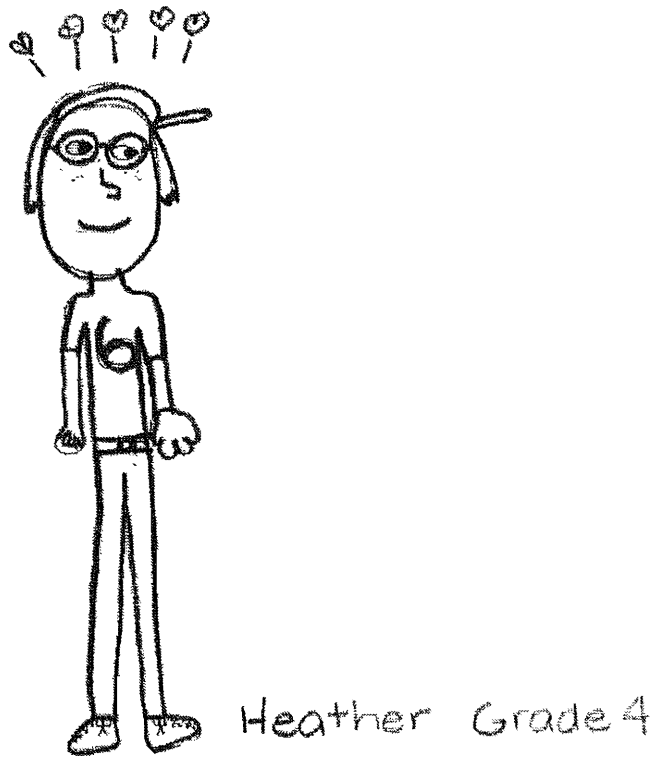
Philosophical discussions can also be positively affected by managing the physical arrangement of the class. The best arrangement we have found so far is the one we call "Big Square." The children sit at their desks which are arranged in as small a square as possible with everyone facing center. We tried sitting in a circle on the floor in the interest of informality but the children were uncomfortable there. The floor is hard, they had to change positions often, and their tendency to fidget with each other interfered with the progress of discussion. Sitting on chairs without desks was better but it took precious time to separate chairs from desks and to move desks out of the way. Moving desks and chairs into the square also takes time, but it is much easier and the children can learn to do it very efficiently. In this arrangement the teacher sits in the square with the children as do any visitors.

The advantages of this arrangement are that people can see each other, they are comfortable and they have a surface for *Harry*[2] or for writing should that be appropriate. Also, fidgeters may fidget without interfering with the proceedings. People often think better when they have something in their hands and this arrangement makes provision for that tendency. The disadvantages are that if the group is large, the children are far from each other. There is also a degree of formality in the rigidity of the shape and the fact that they are behind physical barriers. However, in practice these potentially negative aspects are more often offset by the advantages. This may be because whether written or oral, philosophy is essentially a mental activity. Seeing each other's faces is important as is comfort and





freedom from distraction.

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Large-group discussions are treated as *the* vehicle for learning what it is to think philosophically and we have had to develop a number of strategies to ensure maximum productivity. We begin each chapter of *Harry* with shared reading followed by a listing of the ideas of interest to the children and these are recorded on very large, lined chart paper so they can be saved. The formulation of each entry is carefully considered by everyone in order to express precisely and concisely the idea suggested. During these 'discussions' I am able to model different dialogue 'moves' and to encourage constructive discussion practices. Also important, however, is the *visual* recording of the results of our deliberations.

This became particularly evident in the first conceptual discussion we had on the distinction between discovery and invention. Once we got to the area of overlap between these two concepts, the inevitable occurred: the discussion became circular. As long as the points made existed only in mid-air, dependent for their existence on our memories, the tendency was towards increasing muddle rather than clarity. What was needed was a way to represent *visually* the points made and so began our extended use of chart paper.

One of the advantages of writing things down is that it can force an issue. Commitment to an idea is necessary before something is written and this demands precision of expression. Some degree of consensus is also required and that implies a community effort which can result in clearer thinking. The chart provides a visual trace of the progress of the discussion thus reinforcing the notion of a philosophical discussion as one that builds and has direction. The main disadvantage to this procedure is that it takes time. It is all too easy to spend time sorting out a fine point or choosing the best words — time that would be better spent chasing thoughts orally. This just means, however, that it is a strategy to be used judiciously. It must always enhance the discussion and must not be allowed to inhibit it.

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Frustrations are common in a programme such as this and dealing with them can involve important philosophical activity. From the outset we took time periodically to discuss discussions. It was a time for the children to vent their frustrations and to make suggestions. When they did, it was as if they were fine-tuning their instrument.

Three more charts grew out of these sessions. On one we collected what we called "Discussion 'Moves.' " These were listed in quotation marks and were things which people could actually say in discussions in order to better understand the ideas of others. Some examples were: "What are you driving at?", "What if . . .", and "Can you give an example of what you mean?" They found many of these by listening to me as I would make a point of using them whenever engaging a child in dialogue. The second chart was called "Discussion Guidelines" and included recommended behaviour which would help the discussion to be productive. Thus: "Listen to the speaker while you keep track of your idea," "Only repeat an idea for a purpose," and "Criticize ideas constructively." Many were obvious, others were far from obvious, and all were meaningful to the children for they were derived from their own experience.

The third chart evolved only after several months and at a point when some people considered it to be unfair that

I had special privileges in discussions. If the objective was to have the students talk as much as possible to each other, then why did I not just let them get on with it? Why indeed? When I responded that my purpose was either to teach them something directly or to model for them, they readily acknowledged that role. However, they still maintained that I stepped on their territory more than I should.

After some reflection, I decided to show them their comments were taken seriously. Pointing out that leading a discussion involved some additional skills, I invited people to volunteer to learn how to be a discussion leader. All we needed to do was to develop a third chart titled, "Leader Guidelines." These included guidelines specific to discussion leaders such as: "Try to boost the discussion," "Explore other people's ideas rather than expressing your own," and "Encourage as many people as possible to speak." Again they learned by identifying elements of my behaviour *as* leader.

That was how we began having Student-led Discussions ("SLDs") which we used as five to ten-minute warm-ups. Only one question would be discussed and it was usually of a hypothetical nature. Many children volunteered and they soon experienced the trickiness of being in a leadership position. (The fact that they were leading their peers made it all the more difficult for them.) We all learned a lot from these episodes and they became such an important part of the programme that the children felt cheated if we didn't have one every session. At times I wondered if they weren't *too* successful because after some pretty good sessions, some felt so confident that it was as if they felt they had nothing more to learn when in fact we had only just begun.

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One of the frustrations that has plagued us from the beginning is that of being unable to find a comfortable procedure which would permit everyone who wanted to contribute to do so and in an appropriate order. As the children learn to discuss effectively, traditional teacher-pupil exchanges become less appropriate resulting in problems such as how to decide who should be next to speak and how to have the students talk with each other without always having to go through the teacher. There is also the concurrent problem of the distraction to themselves and others caused by enthusiastic hand-wavers. Once hands are up, to what extent are their owners merely waiting their turn and not listening carefully to the discussion? It is when they become impatient that this problem can become intolerable.

Here is a strategy we devised which helps that situation. Someone in the group becomes name recorder and sits to the right of the discussion leader. As the discussion begins, hands go up and the recorder jots down each person's name in order, signaalling silently to would-be speakers who can relax and pay attention to the discussion knowing their turns will come. First-time speakers have priority, but otherwise people can contribute as often as they wish, time permitting. The result can be magic. With practice it can become like an auction where hand signals are very subtle.

It is a procedure which helps enormously and its chief advantage is its invisibility. Again children who benefit most are those who might refrain from having to jump into a lively discussion. This way, by merely raising a finger they can see that in time their contributions will be solicited. They can still change their minds when their turns come, so it is relatively safe and encouraging.

It helps but it is not perfect of course. As it is a predetermined list, it can lend an artificial quality to the discussion and prevent it from having the flow of a dialogue. Occasionally the more vocal children become impatient with such controls so every now and then we have 'open' discussions in which the procedure doesn't apply. What happens then can be quite interesting. When a free-for-all breaks out, the children become impatient with each other and they soon see the point of the controls. At such times they will sometimes instinctively respect the rules or they will request that others do so simply because it is a better way. However, when that doesn't happen, the discussion can degenerate while they vent their frustrations instead. Then too they are usually quite happy to return to the more controlled format.

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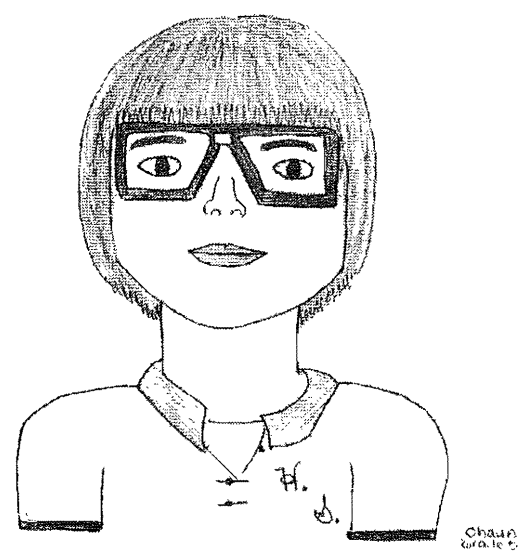
In order to develop the students' ability to engage in dialogue and also to counter-act the tendency for discussions to be a linear succession of independent opinions, a special dialogue procedure was devised. It applies especially in Student-led Discussions but teachers can also model it when engaging children in dialogue. First the leader puts a question to the group and invites responses. The first person to respond expresses an idea and then the leader is expected to follow up using one of the 'moves' from the Discussion 'Moves' collection. The purpose is to encourage the children to speak to each other and to explore each other's ideas rather than merely to go from one to another to another on the assumption that each idea is well expressed and understood. The respondent then has the right



to reply before the leader seeks the thoughts of another contributor. During the course of the discussion, if someone identifies and comments on the ideas of a previous contributor, then the latter has an immediate right to reply and a dialogue can ensue between these two.

Although this procedure can work very well, it too can feel contrived and the children sometimes react to that with frustration. At first the leader is expected to engage in dialogue with *each* participant. Often he will not know what to say in response to a contributor and this experience can provide valuable insight into what it is to engage in dialogue. Later though, the children learn to distinguish between the kinds of responses which lend themselves to dialogue and others which do not. They can then be the judge and the discussion loosens up, speeds up and becomes more productive and satisfying.

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Small-group discussions are a variation in format and can offer advantages. The children's desks face each other in groups of six or eight forming 'tables.' Then, using the namecards as place cards, the children are seated at the tables at random. A chosen leader may then use the cards to see that everyone has a fair chance to participate. Usually the children have an exercise from the manual to work on and the idea is to discuss, to try and reach some consensus, and to record responses and thoughts. Small-group discussion activities are therefore highly structured while providing the children with a lot of opportunity to discuss freely.

One important advantage of this format is that the children have maximum opportunity to participate and some will contribute to small-group discussions when they won't in large-group ones. Another advantage is that these discussions can provide opportunities to practice some of the guidelines and procedures which they have collected in large-group activities. And since they are not under the direct supervision of an authority figure, the children have a sense of freedom in these discussions.

For the teacher (who can't be at every table) however, small-group discussions can be frustrating. Although it is clear that the children are engaged in lively conversation and usually on the topic, it is not at all clear what they are learning from the experience. There is a distinct possibility that what they are having is 'just' a discussion — not necessarily a philosophical one. Without the immediate presence of the teacher, they find it all too easy to disregard the very guidelines which they themselves have formulated and which they observe well in large-group discussions. Designated leaders are tolerated but not always respected and the 'natural' leaders find it difficult to resist dominating. Also, children who are characteristically uncooperative tend to take advantage of these distantly supervised groups.

Interestingly, the pilot group's reaction to small vs large-group discussions changed over time. At first they much preferred small groups precisely because they could participate easily and often. Later, however, as large-group discussions became more productive, the children preferred those. It seemed to be a function of what they felt they got out of the discussion and that, I like to think, may be a rough measure of the success of the strategies and the degree to which a given discussion 'managed' to be philosophical.

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To describe these strategies one after another and to call them 'management' strategies is perhaps to invite protest for there can be something inherently disagreeable about the very notion of a 'managed' discussion. (One might even wonder if it isn't a contradiction in terms.) Our experience has been that these measures help much more than they hinder. The children contribute to their formulation and, despite their sometimes frequent frustration, they take great delight in seeing them work. Although these particular strategies may or may not work for others, they do work for us because they are ours. They grow out of our experience together and we adjust and refine them as we go along. It is a constructive, creative and often a highly philosophical process and it is this process — more than any specific strategy — which is recommended.

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NOTES

[1]Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980) p. 104.

[2]Lipman, Matthew, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, Upper Montclair, N.J.: IAPC, 1974.

