Controlling the Classroom Clamor:

A Few Techniques to Facilitate Philosophical Discourse

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No matter how clearly the goal of reasoned, respectful exchange and development of ideas may appear to us, frequent stumbling blocks may keep us from reaching it as readily as we would wish. Or, to change the metaphor, there are all too many slips between the cup of philosophical issues that attracts us, and the lips that seek to discourse upon them. In his article, "Some Factors Influencing the Success of Philosophical Discussion in the Classroom," (*Analytic Teaching*, Volume 3, Number 1) Michael Whalley points out some kinds of behavior which may make such discussion difficult, and suggests some rules to help provide conditions for successful philosophical communication in the classroom.

We need to find ways to provide chances for all the children who want to speak, and also to encourage giving attention to the person who is speaking. Furthermore, we want to have the discussion move among the children rather than exclusively through the teacher. Letting kids just talk is rarely successful — especially at first when philosophy is a new venture. The children aren't practiced in listening to each other. Even if they try, they don't know how to get clues from each other as to when to take a turn. There is a tendency for many private conversations to spring up, resulting in bedlam.

Whalley suggests a few rules which may keep the conversation orderly and provide the basis for genuine discussion. Rules can give a framework for discussion. Beyond the rules, however, some positive steps may be taken to help direct children's attention to each other, and to make for a flow of discussion among all the participants. I would like to suggest a few such techniques.

(1) One way of avoiding having teacher intervention after every comment by a student is to have each speaker call on the next. The teacher, having asked a question or directed attention to some topic, asks for comment and calls on someone. That person, having spoken, calls on someone from among those with raised hands. The latter in turn looks around for people wanting to carry the discussion further. It's true that one comment may be irrelevant to the preceding, and that the teacher may need to join in frequently, to point that out. Or he/she may want to note statements that are similar, or to ask someone to respond to a statement that challenged his/hers, and so on. Still, the process is a first step towards moving the teacher from the center of the stage to a position as one among the group. And this procedure does direct the child's attention to the other children — even if only to hear when the speaker is finishing so one can get one's hand up quickly.

(2) The instructional manuals accompanying the philosophical novels about Harry Stottlemeier and his friends contain numerous exercises to help children think and talk about the issues raised in the books. When a teacher plans to use one of these exercises, the questions (statements, examples, or whatever) may be written on separate slips of paper and handed out to individual children. Then each child is responsible for introducing the question (statement, etc.) into the discussion. The child might read his/her slip of paper and then comment on it, or after reading might call on someone else (anyone who wants to join in) to comment. If there's further discussion of that particular statement, the child who read it aloud could be responsible for leading that discussion. If the questions should best be used in numerical order, it will be up to the teacher to number the slips and then to ask for #1, #2, and so on.

In a similar class plan, the exercise can be duplicated as a whole, with a copy for each student. After the class has had a few minutes to look over and think about the exercise, one child reads the first statement or question aloud and calls on someone to respond. The latter, after commenting, calls on a third person, who responds and then reads aloud the next item, and so on. It can be stipulated that no one gets a second term.

These plans may seem somewhat artificial, but they do lend variety of approach. And, though the teacher may need to join in frequently, introduction of the questions is still by the students, and the attention of the others will be directed to their classmate.

(3) As the children become more involved in philosophical ideas, and more accustomed to classroom discussion, they can participate increasingly in directing the course of that discussion. When there is a game, small group activity, or written exercise, insofar as possible children should be involved in reading directions and starting things off. After some months, when the children have been working together for a time, the whole direction of a game may be given to a student who will have had a chance to read the directions beforehand. Of course, the teacher is on hand to help out when needed. But the competence of children, their responsibility for the functioning of the class, and their participation has been emphasized.

When the purposes and procedures of the philosophy class are becoming familiar to the children, individual students or pairs of students can be given responsibility for leading discussion of whole exercises, or of groups of questions. This, of course, would require some preparation in a meeting of teacher and student-leader to be sure the students understand the directions of the activity or the words of the questions. And the teacher then has the opportunity to remind the children of the desirable course of a discussion — that there be many participants, common attention to a set of topics, no criticism of persons, attentive listening to the speaker, and so on. After the student-leaders have finished, it would be good to have them consider how well the discussion went. There may be a private

conference with the teacher, or the whole class may have comments on the day's proceedings. Whether the young pedagogues may safely be left to the criticism of their classmates, the teacher can judge. Over the course of time, it should be possible to give everyone who would like one a turn to do this student-leading, especially if the children take on the responsibility in pairs.

(4) In some classes, the matter of letting everyone have a fair share of turns to speak may become a serious problem. Where the children readily become involved in philosophy and are especially eager to join in the discussion, those who are less insistent may feel that they are being left out — that the most vigorous hand wavers, the loudest exclaimers, the most violent bouncers-up-and-down, are getting all the attention and being recognized more frequently — as well they may. Or, in classes where there are some especially talkative and long-winded children, others may feel that the time has been unfairly monopolized. Of course, as Whalley notes, it would be very difficult to make a clear rule stating how much talk is too much. But the matter can be handled to some extent by limiting the number of opportunities to talk.

Two techniques invented by teachers I've worked with have involved limiting opportunities for a second chance until everyone who wants one has had a first. In one case, the teacher had heard of resentful mutterings that certain children had done all the talking and that others never had a chance. The teacher discussed the matter with the children, and they agreed that he should keep a record of who'd spoken and call on no one a second time if there was anyone still waiting a first turn. This worked well: the children were happy; the teacher was able to keep the record without spending much time on it; anyone too shy or uncertain to demand a chance to speak was asked if she/he had a comment: the resentful mutterings ended. Of course it was a technique that was, and was intended to be, only temporary. In a short time, the group came to feel that the whole discussion belonged to everyone, and record keeping could be discarded.

Another teacher had some vociferous kids in a group that tended as a whole to be rather rowdy. She tried a procedure that involved one of the children (a different one for each class) in the attempts to keep kids from calling out or from monopolizing the discussion. As the children entered the classroom, each was given a card — all with the same identifying color or mark for that day. When someone wanted to speak, he/she raised the card in the air. And as each child got a turn, the monitor took the card away. As long as anyone had a card and wanted to speak, those who'd given up their cards weren't called on.

Both of these procedures are of course artificial and rather confining, but they can be helpful in establishing habits of sharing time and of thinking before one speaks.

(5) As the children speak more, the teacher should be speaking less. But the habits of pedagogy can be hard to break. Especially at the start of a philosophy course, the teacher may find it very difficult indeed to let the ideas



come from the children, and to wait if need be until they do indeed speak out. The teacher who kept a roll-book record of speakers felt he had to institute some control over his own possible tendencies to monopolize the discussion. To indicate that he was one among the members of the group, though he was its leader, he sat on a high stool. When he was going to say something (other than to call on a student) he stood up. That acted as a signal to the children, and also as a reminder to him. He was in a sense acknowledging in a very visible way that he too should be limited in the amount and frequency of talking that he could do.

(6) If all else fails - give up until another day. Early on in the school year, when students are just becoming acquainted with the purposes and procedures of philosophical discussion — when their skill in developing ideas is yet limited and each one's insistence on getting a word in is still dominant — it may be well to use only part of any class period for discussion. It is easier to hold a group together for a shorter time — to remind them of the rules or procedures agreed upon, and then to keep going only so long as most of the children are following them. Rather than getting into a situation where one must nag at the children with frequent reminders of behavior expected, one can shift to another kind of acitvity. Reading, games, or written exercises can be used for the rest of the time set aside for philosophy. Written work need not be composition, if the age or ability of the students make that difficult or impossible. Children can make pictures, write short

answers, choose (by circling or underlining) which answer is best. The possibilities are numerous. Discussion in small groups is another possibility. Working in groups of 4 to 6 may give the children desired turns — and they will certainly feel free to tell one another if one of them is monopolizing the talk.

(7) The provision of frequent opportunities or even requirements for written work seems to me most worthwhile, quite beyond its use as an alternative when orderly discussion proves impossible for the moment. I am an enthusiastic proponent of discussion, for many of the values it has: all children are on an equal footing, despite differences in reading skills; sharing of ideas leads to broader understanding, to more critical interpretation, to the analysis and development of ideas beyond what any individual in the group might be capable of; habits of attention to and respect for others cannot be developed in solitude. For these reasons and others, I do feel that discussion is a major part of the best program of philosophy for children. Still I would like to urge here the values that some kinds of writing may add to the program.

For one, if some exercises, sets of questions, etc., are given to the children to be thought about individually before class discussion, every child is pushed to think about each one of the questions or examples and to try to decide on his/her answer. In subsequent discussion, these answers are considered and analyzed, criticized, amplified, defended, and so on. But there may well be more possible answers suggested if the children have first considered the problems individually.

After a discussion, children may be asked to write their reactions in a log of some kind. Children who, for some reason (whether time, timidity, course of discussion or whatever) were left with thoughts that they really wanted to express, have an opportunity to write them down. This writing can be for each child alone, or for the whole group. In a log, children might write their reaction to the day's talk, or something they'd wanted to say, or something they'd concluded. Anything interesting and in some way or other pertinent to philosophy discussions would be appropriate for the log.

Another possibility would be a philosophy bulletin board. Under a heading, "Something I really wanted to say. . . " or some such, students might have an opportunity to pin up a short statement. In fact, even before children can write, they might have the opportunity to ask the teacher to write a sentence or two for them. Of course it must be understood that no personal attacks or negative comments about other individuals belong on such a public space.

(8) Finally, in this grab-bag of suggested techniques for dealing with or for avoiding some typical problems, I would suggest that the children themselves be involved in critical reflection on the course of the discussions. This can be done in different ways. Sometimes at the end of a class the teacher might leave a few minutes to have the whole group comment on how that day's discussion went. Or the teacher might start with: "We seemed to me to be having some problems with the discussion today. Did you notice that? In what way? Why do you suppose that happened? What can we do about it?" Or on other (one may hope frequent) occasions: "We had some splended discourse today. Did you notice that? In what way? Why do you suppose that happened? What can we do to make it happen often?"

At times one child might be asked to be an observer for the day. If rules have been agreed on, the observer is asked to take notice of the adherence to or disregard of the rules: did two or more children speak at once? Were comments relevant? Was personal criticism avoided?

When children are working in small groups, they can be asked to consider how leaders were chosen, conclusions reached, or whatever were the tasks for the day. In the small group, children are likely to be more acutely aware of what each individual did or said.

Of course, in all these forms of class self-evaluation, criticism of individuals, even mention of individual names, is to be avoided. Those who talk incessantly, make rude comments, or turn their backs and look out the window, will (we hope) recognize themselves from the bare description without mention of a name.

No doubt other techniques would be — have been — devised to help the course of discussion to run in as lively but unhindered fashion as possible. I look forward to reading the suggestions of others — teachers, trainers, professors — who are working in the field. For the techniques suggested here, I express my appreciation to various teachers in districts where I have helped to introduce philosophy for children: to the teachers in Hillsborough, in Red Bank and Shrewsbury and Atlantic Highlands, in Wallingford and in Swarthmore, whose eagerness to help their students develop the skills for worthwhile philosophical discussion has led all of us to develop and to share varied paths to the common goal.

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