Thinking in Writing

Children learn to think philosophically through discussion. They learn to reflect on their ideas and to express them meaningfully to others. They also learn to listen reflectively to ideas expressed meaningfully *by* others. And this is done orally.

Teachers help children to express their philosophical thoughts by providing opportunities for them to participate in communities of inquiry, by providing training in the art of philosophical discussion and by teaching specific philosophical concepts and skills. This too is done orally.

There is, however, another powerful way, and that is thinking in writing. It parallels discussion, is complementary to it and it can make an important contribution to the development of the children's ability to do philosophy whether orally *or* in writing. Moreover, it has the added advantage of contributing at the same time and in important ways to the development of writing skills.

That thinking in writing is for both children and teachers and that it has an important, if not essential, contribution to make to any Philosophy for Children program, I hope to show in what follows. Teachers, for example, can increase the effectiveness of their efforts by thinking in writing about what they are doing as they encourage children to think philosophically. Similarly children can learn more about their own thoughts and how to reflect on them philosophically by 'seeing' them in writing. The benefits to teachers, children and any philosophical thinking program are rich and complex — more so than can be adequately outlined here. Rather, let this be a first look — one which may stimulate further exploration of and attention to an important dimension of what it is to do philosophy.

When I began to do philosophy with my grade five class at Edinburgh School in Montreal in January 1981, I decided to keep a detailed Journal of the proceedings. Not only did I want to keep somewhat of an historical record, but I hoped it would prove to be a valuable means for me to think through what we were doing. Thoughts can have an effervescent quality and their tendency to come and go can be exasperating. Keeping a Journal helped me to capture elusive thoughts and to think productively with and about them. The program for the children benefitted enormously as a result, I like to think.

Because I was doing philosophy with the children under the name of Language Arts, I felt a responsibility to ensure that the children had opportunities to write. At the same time, however, because of my own preference for thinking in writing, I wanted them to experience what it is to do that. Thinking may be primarily a mental activity and thoughts are most commonly shared through discussion, but that is far from all there is to it. If by philosophical thinking we want to mean productive thinking, then there is a sense in which simply having thoughts and sharing them may not count. In Philosophy for Children (or Analytic Teaching) programs we teach children how, through discussion, to actually work on ideas, to revise them, to discard some and to put others together in productive ways. Why not also in writing?

Extracts both from the Journal I kept at the time and from the children's early attempts at thinking in writing are offered in order to illustrate what it can mean for both to engage in thinking through writing. The Journal extracts are taken from the very early stages of the program (only the third session in fact) and they show the transition from oral and somewhat informal discussion based on a question-and-answer exercise to the beginnings of written activity. The children's writing takes the form of written responses to the questions posed in the second part of the lesson described in the Journal. Since I am the author of the Journal, perhaps I may be forgiven for reflecting further on it here. The children's responses, however, typical of first efforts it should be stressed, will be left to speak for themselves.

The plan for the lesson was to begin with an oral "warm-up" which might lead into a written exercise. The issue was one which had, in the previous session, seemed puzzling to the children: the distinction between thinking and thinking for oneself. For the oral warm-up I decided to use Exercise 4B on page 8 of *Philosophical Inquiry*, the instructional manual which accompanies *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery.* Then, for the written activity, I chose the "Thinking About Thinking" exercise on pages 9-10 of the Manual. My plan, I soon discovered, was rather ambitious and required more than one session to complete.

I. A Teacher Thinks in Writing

In the oral warm-up exercise there were seven questions and these were put on index cards so that they could be distributed to different children to ask. This was first to take the focus off me as chief question-asker whenever feasible. Secondly it was to require the children to read aloud articulately and for a specific purpose. And thirdly it was to ensure that as many children as possible have at least something to say as often as possible.

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The desks were arranged in the "Big Square" and it worked very well indeed. Again, it took minutes to accomplish, it provided a writing surface if needed, it was comfortable and people could see each other easily. The fact that we were a bit distant proved to be no hindrance and provided a natural incentive for quiet people to speak up.

We began by shuffling and distributing the question cards and I sat in the place of an absent child. I explained that one of the purposes of the question cards was to relieve the teacher of the question-asking duties and therefore also of the constant focus of attention. Some children volunteered to "be the teacher" and when I suggested that there wasn't to be one, they were amused at the very thought. Then they made the very practical demand that I make a name card for myself so that I would have my share of turns responding to questions and participating "like the others." I complied and we proceeded.

We began the exercise orally with the children asking the questions from their cards and then we chose two or three people to answer by turning up name cards.

There were two problems with this. The first was organizational as it soon became apparent that the method of selecting respondents was a bit controlled and didn't really allow the children who wanted to speak to have their say and these were often the ones with the interesting observations to make. We therefore modified the procedure and did both. The first two to respond came from the name cards and then we asked if anyone had anything to add. That worked better.

Secondly, the children seemed to have more difficulty with this exercise than I might have expected — even those seldom at a loss. They had particular difficulty figuring out or imagining what Lisa, Mrs. Olson and Mrs. Stottlemeier might have been thinking to themselves and those who responded to the questions about Mr. Bradley had a rather negative view of him. They attributed to him such thoughts as, "It served Harry right for not paying attention, or for giving a wrong answer."

Speculating about possible reasons for the difficulties, I wonder about a number of possibilities. It may be, for example, that what is called for is a very specific use of imagination. It is not the usual 'imagine anything at all' use but rather imagine in the sense of trying to identify with the character in terms of that character, his/her relationship with the other character(s) and in this particular situation. The situation too must be imagined and all its salient features taken into account. It is a complex activity and viewed this way it becomes understandable that it might prove to be difficult for some, if not many.

The relevance of this activity to reading comprehension is striking. If the children are reading just to get the words off the page, so to speak, and with a limited use of their imaginations, then it may well be that their comprehension may be at a rather superficial level. The difficulties they were having suggest that they could do with a lot more practice.

Another possibility as a reason for difficulty might be their expectations regarding acceptable 'answers.' One child even said with glee, "I know *the* answer!" What answer, I asked, and explained that we were looking not for "right" answers but *good* ones. And an answer would be considered 'good' if it had reasons or evidence to support it. I sometimes get the feeling they think they're being put on by such talk. Of course questions have 'answers' — or if they don't, they should have, or they do but we just haven't found them — yet.

The foregoing is an example of thinking through Journal writing. It began as a mere record of what happened with some reflection on why. Observations were recorded — some of which may have been made at the time of the class. The Journal served to capture those. In the writing, however, *further* observations were generated, problems were identified and possible solutions were contemplated. Occasionally a fairly detailed analysis of what went on is called for in order to better understand the state of the art in the class and to better plan future sessions. It seems to me that this sort of Journal writing has a crucial contribution to make.

One of the main frustrations in doing exercises orally is that we rarely manage to deal satisfactorily with all the questions and this is particularly important when there is a sequential build-up as there is in the exercise on Thinking About Thinking (Manual, pp. 9-10). Also frustrating to the children is that although they all get a chance to think up their answers to the questions, they cannot all express them given the time constraints. A dual purpose for doing such an exercise in writing therefore, is to ensure that all the children at least attempt to respond to each question in sequence and to use writing as the medium for expressing their responses.

A number of different Language Arts objectives can be met through such exercises as well. Those who read the questions aloud must do so in such a way as to convey the meaning clearly. They have an important responsibility to their listeners. The listeners in turn must listen very carefully for that meaning. (Depending on the length and complexity of the questions, it is sometimes better for the children to actually see the questions in writing. For this exercise, however, listening to the questions was entirely appropriate.) In terms of writing skills, the children are expected to write complete answers using good sentence form.

The previous Journal extract ended with reflections on the children's reactions to the nature of questions and answers in philosophy. To continue:

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If anything should help the above problem, it may be exercises such as this one in which the children experience open-ended questions which are almost self-evident. These questions can't possibly have 'right' answers although they could have good or bad ones. They are questions quite unlike the factual or even opinion ones they are used to and the reactions of some to the questions themselves bore that out. Some were greeted with quizzical facial expressions, others prompted comments including seemingly derogatory ones such as, "That's the worst question I've ever seen!" Or, "I don't know what that question is supposed to mean!"

The decision to make this a written activity was not altogether misguided. The purposes were explained to the children (learn to think and write quickly, practice in writing complete thoughts etc.)

Again we used the concealed question cards, each one being read twice by one of the children. There was a two-minute time limit for writing their answers. They seemed to enjoy the game-like quality of it but were not all that taken with the questions. That could be because they are not used to that sort of question. And also they were beginning to show signs of fatigue by the end of the session.

We only managed five of the twenty questions and I took them in to read at the end. Then I had a dilemma: to correct or not to correct. If I marked up their pages would that inhibit them from answering and thinking the next time?

In the end I decided *to* correct primarily because I have Language Arts objectives to respect through P4C and it was a wonderful way of killing many birds with one stone. Certain standards are worth establishing and how better than indirectly through applied exercises rather than the other typical boring kind. No effort will be made to contaminate this work by requiring corrections. Rather, by this method the children will be encouraged to apply their linguistic and grammatical knowledge in all their work — at all times. They will be encouraged to learn from their mistakes and simply to make sure that next time is better until they've mastered the skills sufficiently to be able to write correctly spontaneously.

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What was interesting in this session was the reaction of the children to the questions. Some thought them weird and somewhat ridiculous — or so they said. I'm not sure they weren't in fact masking a covert fascination with them although that remains to be seen. Others were clearly interested, eagerly awaiting the next question and wondering what it would be. And still others just answered them expressing no discernible reaction but their 'answers' indicated that they took the questions seriously. The facial expressions of some were revealing and many were quite spontaneously vocal about it. A question which came up more than once was, "Who made up these questions, anyway?" and, holding the obviously typed-by-me card in their hands they'd ask, "Did you?" I assured them I hadn't but that they came from the author(s) of *Harry*. That settled the issue — but I'm not sure if for better or for worse.

Throughout this session I maintained an informal attitude hoping to foster enjoyment of a session of 'play' with one's thoughts. We joked mildly about the time-limits for the questions with some children clock-watching and realizing that my "two minutes" varied with each question.

It was disappointing that we didn't manage to finish the twenty questions (there are six remaining) because it will mean yet another session the same.

A note about having "corrected" their responses. I explained to them the reasons for having done so and my expectations that they would learn from their errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar by not repeating the errors identified. The second session's questions were much better in terms of fragment sentence responses (indicated to the children by square brackets) and in general they appear to be making an effort to give more than minimal responses. But there is a long way to go here. I wonder if some of their short answers stem from a concept of an 'answer' as a unitary thing — short and to the point. They have heard me ask for "thoughtful" answers and will hear it a lot more to be sure.

In reading their answers to the questions in this session, I was struck by the variety of responses and by the number of children who said they never (or rarely) think about their own thinking.

II. Children Think in Writing

In this section the children will speak (in writing) for themselves. Their responses to six of the questions in the exercise are reproduced here as a sample of their early efforts.

1. Have You Ever Wondered Why You Remember?

— Yes I have and what I've come up with is this. If you didn't remember, you wouldn't know who you were.
— Yes, I remember because the good things and bad things are very hard to forget.
— No, I really haven't but now I will.
— No!
— No, because why should I bother? I don't care.
— Yes, because sometimes if you see something bad it's hard to forget.
— No. I think it's because when you do things it just sticks in your mind.
— Yes, because it is locked in your brain.
— I've never really wondered why I remember. I guess it is maybe because I am intelligent but I think it's mostly because of something that functions in our brain.
— No, but it has such a funny thing about it. Every time I sleep, I always forget and when I'm up I remember.
— I never really ever wondered why I remember. I do think about why life was invented by God.

2. Which Do You Prefer, Imagining or Remembering?

— I prefer remembering because I wouldn't forget things and I'd remember my times tables and things like that.
— I like both of them but I find I like imagining more because in remembering there are sad moments but when you imagine it is normally happy.
— I prefer imagining because you can do very good things. But when remembering you only remember the (bad) things. They might not be as good as imagining.
— I prefer remembering because I like to tell people the past.
— I prefer remembering because it brings back things you did when you were small.
— I prefer imagining because it's much more fun.
— I prefer imagining because I like dreaming about what will happen in the future.
— I prefer imagining because nothing happens badly when you imagine.
— I prefer remembering because if you remember things from way back it's sort of fun to think about it.
— I prefer imagining because it is nicer to imagine what happened.
— I prefer imagining because I cannot remember that well.
— I prefer remembering because I can look back on old things that happened to me.
— I prefer imagining because anything can happen to you anywhere. I also like remembering because some memories are nice to think of again.

—I prefer remembering because sometimes they make me remember my (late) grandfather (he was really neat).
—I prefer imagining because you can imagine anything you want—something good or bad.
—I like imagining and remembering but I think I like to memorize and play remembering games so I guess I like remembering better.
—I prefer imagining because it drives me off to fantasy land. Also because I think of me being an actor or something like that.
—I like remembering because you will remember some things all your life and they will be important then. I also like imagining because you can imagine more weird and funny things than you can when you remember.
—I prefer imagining because when I remember about England I feel sad that I am not there.
—I really like imagining about my other parents and what they're doing right now. It's neat to imagine what they're doing or how they look.

3. **Have You Ever Wondered Why You Wonder?**

—No I have not really wondered and I don't really know why I don't wonder why I wonder.
—Things are so important in a dream. I don't wonder why you wonder.
—I think people wonder so they can learn.
—Sometimes I have but not a lot.
—Yes, because you want to remember but you can't or you want to knock some sense into your head.
—I wonder why I wonder because I'm so bored to death when the teacher is talking to the class and when there's nothing to do.
—No, sorry, I can't find an explanation.
—Yes, because sometimes like when you're bored you say to yourself it would be nice if I had this or that or like a million dollars.
—Yes. I wonder because it's lots of fun.
—No. I think it's because if you're bored you wonder about things.
—Yes, I wonder why I wonder. It just seems to come to my mind.
—I wonder because I don't know the answer.
—No. I don't wonder why I wonder because I just wonder. (I don't think this makes sense.)
—No, I have never really wondered why I wonder and I don't exactly know why either.
—I wonder why I wonder because it is funny to know ancestors that lived in the 1700's and because my dad is supposed to know more French than my mother.
—No, I don't wonder why I wonder but my sister does a lot.
—No, I have not wondered why I wonder because I have never thought about that.
—Yes, I have wondered why I wonder because it is strange how the brain works in the way of wondering.

4. **Can You Take a Thought Apart, The Way You Can Take a Watch or a Sentence Apart?**

—No, you cannot take thoughts apart, because once you have a thought you can change it but not really.
—Yes, I can. Like I can stop my thoughts and do an instant replay and I can also make it slow motion.
—No, I can't because I can't change the subject.
—No, I can't take a thought apart because I've never tried.
—No, because it's non-matter.
—No, you can't take a thought apart because it's precious to you and it means a lot to you.
—No, I can't because it's like splitting up real life, like you're about to score a goal and you stop dead.
—Yes, you can because if you're dreaming you can be cut off in the middle.
—No, I can't. It's too hard to do something like that.
—Yes, you can take a thought apart if you want to.
—Yes, I can take a thought apart by thinking parts of my thought with other thoughts.
—I can't take thoughts apart because I don't understand the question. If you mean the feeling, then yes.
—No, I don't think you can because you can't take another thought and mix it with another thought.
—Yes, just think of half, or a quarter of it.
—I guess you can because your ideas and thoughts change and because you could have a thought break it up and change it or think differently about it (to improve your thoughts).
—Yes, I can take a thought apart but not like a watch or a t.v.
—No. Thoughts cannot be taken apart because a person does not think how else a thought can be put.
—No, I can't because you can't change the way you think so you can't take a thought apart.
—No, I cannot but I do not know why.

5. **Are Your Thoughts in Color or in Black and White?**

—My thoughts are in both kinds but most of the time in color.
—My thoughts are in color with every color in the whole world.
—I'm not sure because when I think I can't tell what color it's in.
—My thoughts are in color. (Usually yellow).
—Yes, my thoughts are in color because when I've seen it before I think in color, but if I haven't seen it before I think in black and white.
—My thoughts are basically in color because when I have dreams they're usually gory so I see the blood and sometimes you see things in color.
—My thoughts are neither. They just come sometimes in color and sometimes not. But they're there.
—My thoughts are in color because I have a color t.v. so I like colored thoughts.

—They are usually in color when I close my eyes. Usually when I close my eyes I see pictures of comic strips.
—My thoughts are in color because it is prettier. Also it gives me more imagination.
—Yes, my colored thoughts are in bright red and green but some things are in black and white.
—I really don't know. I never think about that.
—My thoughts are in color. I like them to be in color.

6. Do You Have Favorite Thoughts?

—No, I do not have favorite thoughts. I don't know why.
—Yes, I do. I think about war and how it would affect the Earth, my community and my country because I am afraid of it. I think about it a lot and I always IMAGINE my country wins.
—I have favorite thoughts about skiing in Jay Peak, being a millionaire, owning a mansion in Beverly Hills with a yacht, being a doctor and being very smart.
—My favorite thoughts are of when I was a baby.
—No, I don't have favorite thoughts because I like all my thoughts the same.
—Yes, I like to think about what's going to happen in the future.
—Whenever I think about something, it's something that will happen to me in the future. For example, when it's summer again I'll go to day camp.
—Yes, my favorite thoughts are being a great sports star, going to winter camp and summer camp.
—No, I really don't have favorite thoughts because I'm usually too busy to think about things.
—Yes, I do have favorite thoughts. I would love to be a famous goalie for a hockey team.
—My favorite thoughts are of when I think about super things I am going to do in the future, like going on vacation.
—No, I don't have any favorite thoughts because I never thought about any thoughts being my favorites.
—Yes, I do have a favorite thought. It was my birthday, maybe my fourth, and a kitten came in my house and ran behind the sofa. It stayed for my party but then my mother chased it.
—Yes, my favorite thoughts are of a bowl of chili or of kittens.
—Yes, I do because what I like, I like to remember.
—No, I don't 'think' I have favorite thoughts. I guess it's because I keep getting new ones all the time.
—I have favorite thoughts because they can be fun to think of. For example, I'd like to be a baseball player, an Olympic swimmer, diver and gymnast.
—I have favorite thoughts that I want to be a roller skating pro but my mother says that sometimes it is impossible and I am not ready.
—My favorite thought is being able to have a dog because I love dogs.
—Yes, I do have favorite thoughts. They are happy and interesting thoughts because it's nice to be happy and thinking happily. I also like to think interesting things because they are interesting.
—Yes, I do. I like to think about England and think of what I am going to do on toe shoes next Thursday.

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