A Bit More On Generalizing Philosophy For Children

Richard Morehouse has identified two crucial areas, central to the pedagogical core of Philosophy for Children (P4C). These, he claims enable techniques associated with P4C to be generalized to other contexts. After Lipman, he reminds us that the power of the P4C curriculum is found, first in the novels which are written to be "captivating and beguiling, designed to liberate the literary and illustrative powers of the children and to stimulate their thinking." This philosophical 'liberation' is both enabled by and enables the child's insight into the individual (or themselves) as 'concrete wholes existing in relationships.' The reading of the novels is the basis for the other major program component, the discussion that prompts the 'reflection on that experience,' 'the pulling of leading ideas from the narrative and the application of conceptual tools to the understanding of those ideas.' The ideas that constitute the content of the P4C program are drawn from the philosophical texts and are applied to the text in the discussion. These ideas include the 'basic tools of philosophy.'

Professor Morehouse has, undoubtedly, chosen the most central and characteristic aspects of the P4C program. But the point of his paper is to do more than identify these crucial factors; rather it is to show how these factors can be utilized within a freshman college psychology course through the use of a "Great Books" program. I have no argument with Professor Morehouse's use of non-P4C materials within a context that utilizes P4C techniques. I take a similar approach in dealing with the problems peculiar to the secondary school setting. This paper attempts to exhibit some of my solutions and also serves as a reminder that there is more to the P4C curriculum than is apparent from Morehouse's discussion: more to the aspects of the program that he discusses and more to the program than he identifies.

In "Teaching Ethics in Secondary School," I discussed factors in a particular educational setting that worked against the acceptability of the P4C program as the vehicle for an ethics curriculum with philosophical goals. In particular I mentioned that both students and faculty found the materials (Lisa and Mark) unacceptable due to the standards for course readings implicit in their ordinary curricula. I believe that this problem is not limited to the school setting that I discussed, but is general in respect of secondary schools. The reason for this has to do with the relative sophistication that is demanded of secondary school teachers, based on the requirement that they be specialists in their fields. And the further factor that, generally speaking, philosophy is neither an element in the secondary school curriculum, nor an aspect of the teacher's professional training. So, for example, if we take a high school English teacher, one who is a fine teacher and dedicated to the development of new professional skills, and induce her to include a philosophical curriculum in her repertoire, she is certain to demand that the curriculum, as a minimum, satisfy the high standards that she would apply to any curricular offering within her field. Whence, as far as an English-based context is concerned the plausibility of an approach similar to that found in "Great Books." But there is a problem here.

Morehouse mentions Lipman's observation that the P4C materials provide a 'model for feeling, thinking, problem solving and discussion.' (p. 25) This creates a real problem when using non-P4C material, such as literature, for a philosophically based program. For there is little if anything found in literature that offers the careful development of the sort of dialogue that Lipman's novels are a singular and extraordinary example of. Not only are Lipman's novels examples, par excellence, of dialogue, but they are dialogues written by a master philosopher for the express purpose of exhibiting philosophical dialogue and presenting philosophical problems. Similar dialogues, outlining philosophical positions and offering dialogical counters within a dramatic narrative in a contemporary setting are just not to be found anywhere else.

Lipman's novels, at their best, outline a range of philosophical alternatives through the plot development and through the characters' conversations. These conversations not only present a range of substantive philosophical positions, but equally important, present a variety of cognitive styles and strategies. Examples of this include Mark, chapter 4, part iv on the problem of law, Suki, chapter 7 part ii on experience and reality, or even Harry and the discussion of theories of mind in chapter 6. The array of concepts and attitudes present in Lipman's novels is so philosophically rich that I would maintain that they are almost impossible to replicate in any analogous unified body of literature (with the exception of classic philosophical texts.) This creates a problem, not for the philosophically sophisticated educator like Professor Morehouse, but for any attempt which like P4C attempts to introduce philosophical content into areas where standard philosophical texts are inappropriate and where there is a need to develop staff that has little or no prior philosophical training.

The philosophical dialogue that constitutes the backbone of Lipman's novels is not the only element that the P4C curriculum offers to enable the application of philosophical skills to concrete and human centered narratives. The manuals that accompany the novels play an indispensable role in furnishing educators, inexperienced with philosophical dialogue, with a device to prompt philosophical responses and to develop the process through which a philosophical community of inquiry can be formed. The manuals function on two main levels in their development of philosophical skills. The first is an ordering of philosophical concepts that grows out of the problems in the novels. The sequence of these problems, reinforced by the exercises in the manuals, form the conceptual skeleton that supports the elaboration of the philosophical issues as they are presented. The second component is an integrated set of critical thinking skills that, while valuable in and of themselves, enable the philosophical issues to be handled with increasing sophistication.

If we are to generalize these aspects of P4C, as we must if we are to mirror the success of P4C in importing philosophical content into non-standard areas, the issue transcends the identifica-
tion of basic practices. If we are to affect the thinking of non-
philosophers, who are serious and well trained professionals, we
must replicate the detail and care with which Lipman has con-
structed his program. In the second part of this paper I will sketch
out my attempt to construct secondary school curriculum that
satisfies the need for literature of the highest quality while retain-
ing the pedagogic detail and sophistication that characterises
P4C.

II

Two years ago the Ethical Culture Society of New York ap-
proached me with the idea of developing a coherent curriculum
strategy in philosophy for secondary schools, a strategy that would
do for the high school what P4C has accomplished with the
elementary and middle school. Their perceived need was the
result of considerations not unlike those mentioned earlier and
detailed in my paper referred to above. After a period of consulta-
tion with faculty, administration and students it was decided that
a three volume series would be attempted. Each volume would be
constructed and taught by faculty with specializations in standard
curriculum areas; we chose English, History and Science. The
governing intuition was that the books would utilize material
chosen for apparent continuity with standard curriculum
elements. That is, the selections used would be the sorts of
readings that students in the standard curriculum areas might be
expected to read and that teachers would feel most comfortable
using. This created problems, each unique to the area under con-
sideration. The most obvious area was English, where we took an
approach similar to 'Great Books'.

The most immediate problem was how to chose elements that
were sufficiently self contained to prompt a philosophical discus-
sion while minimizing the elaborate rehearsal of plot development
that is characteristic of secondary school literature courses. The
solution was based on a review of available literature. It became
apparent that there is a genre of literature that seems tailor made
for philosophical discussion. Every major author who has written
short stories, has written at least some that can be characterized as
short, short stories, stories whose length rarely exceeds five
printed pages. These stories are highly unified in theme, have
minimal plot structure and usually deal with some problem of
clear human significance. These stories, of high literary quality,
and ranging across a wide variety of periods and styles, formed
the core of the reader. In addition to the short, short stories we
used poetry, pieces from contemporary non-fiction, selections
from contemporary adolescent fiction and a few longer pieces. We
included carefully selected and highly edited portions of major
philosophical works. The philosophical texts chosen were picked
for readability and for their clear relevance to the areas under
discussion.

The availability of literature was a strong determining factor in
our choice of theme for the English reader. Happily, the most fre-
quent focus in short, short stories reflected a theme that is uni-
versally held to be the area of maximum concern to the adolescent;
the development of self. The reader is divided into three main sec-
tions, each based on a question that defines a perspective through
which the idea of the self is elaborated: Who Am I?, What Con-
trols Me? and Where Am I Going? The readings for each section
are varied in tone and style, but they are ordered using a strong

conceptual pattern, that elaborates, in a philosophically informed
way, the underlying conceptual structures needed for a non-trivial
philosophical analysis.

What we hope to have done in our choice of readings is to
reflect the diversity of cognitive and metaphysical style that seems
necessary if a philosophical program is to be non-indoctrinating.
Although we could not have a correlate for the philosophical
dialogue that forms the crucial core of P4C, we did attempt to
reflect the openness in philosophical mood and posture that
characterises P4C. I consider the lack of philosophical models of
dialogue to be crucial weakness of the reader as contrasted to Lip-
man's novels. But I could see no solution to the dilemma. The
model of philosophical dialogue must be sacrificed if the basis for
curriculum offering requires the use of standard pieces of
literature. The problem for history and science is even more
severe, for here the demand for a basis that is factually rich pro-
ihits the use of constructed artifacts.

We try to compensate for the lack of models of dialogue by the
care with which we elaborate supporting exercises and discussion
plans. Here we use the P4C model extensively, using series of
questions that begin with the concrete adolescent experience,
developing them in a fashion that, we hope, prompts an increase
in depth and philosophical awareness. Since we cannot include
models of dialogue in the text, we rely heavily on carefully
wrought questions to induce the dialogue in the classroom. But I
am keenly aware of the trade-off. I miss Harry, Tony and Lisa,
miss the interaction between children, parents and teacher. But
what I gain is literature of the highest quality, stories that can be
read for pleasure, selections that reflect the requirement that
readings represent the finest tradition in world literature.

A table of contents is worth a thousand words and so I include
as appendices two versions of the table of contents for Part I of
the English Reader. We are hoping to have the English Reader
published by Spring 1984 at which time the Science Reader
should be completed in draft form. We then begin what might be
the most difficult of the three, the History Reader.

Mark Weinstein

Appendix I
The Fieldson Reader
WHO AM I?

Part I
Introduction
1. THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE, Plato
Section I: Discovering the Self
2. MARIANA, Fritz Leiber
3. AN INQUIRY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTAND-
ing, David Hume
4. MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY, Rene
Descartes
5. THE LOST SOUL, Ben Hecht
6. A DANGEROUS GUY INDEED, Damon Runyon
7. THE MIND'S I, Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett
8. AS YOU LIKE IT, William Shakespeare
9. NOTES TO MYSELF, Hugh Prather

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Appendix 2

ANALYTIC TABLE OF CONTENTS

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      6. social recognition
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FOOTNOTES