

Truth, Thinking, Indoctrination and Meaning: Philosophy for Children is Not Just for Children

In the Fall of 1981, after participating in the Professors' Workshop in Philosophy for Children given by Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp during the Summer of 1980, I introduced an undergraduate course, "Philosophizing With Children" at the College of White Plains of Pace University. Since that time, I have taught the course once a semester during each academic year. I have had as my goal the emergence of a community of inquiry from both the students and myself so that we would be able to encourage one another to think about things that are important to us, think reflectively and critically about our thinking and, thereby, enrich our own lives and the lives of others. My goal, as Lipman's is for the Philosophy for Children program, is not to enable students to learn Philosophy, or for me to teach them "children's" Philosophy or theories of pedagogy but to encourage them to think philosophically. If they can do this with their peers, they are well on their way to being able to do it with others, including children.

My classes have always been composed of students from a wide variety of racial, religious, social, educational, vocational and chronological backgrounds. Nevertheless, one aspect that has consistently appeared in each community has been the development of at least one qualitatively significant thinker who not only sees the viability of doing Philosophy with Children, but also applies the dialogical method used in class to their own living so that the course, for them, becomes not only one in philosophizing with children but also one of philosophizing with one's self.

The following excerpts are from a woman's journal which she kept as a term project. She wrote in her journal before, during and after each class session, and her entries indicate to me that my goal for the course has, at least in some instances, been realized.

"Truth"

"When Chapter One (of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*) was read aloud in class, I was astounded by the copious amount of ideas that could be formulated as well as questions asked . . . (and) I was fascinated by the discussion of What is Truth? What makes a statement true? For the first time I became aware of how flippantly we use words without question. As Harry learned to think critically and reflect on his mistake, I found the class stimulating for me with my ears perked to think and listen more critically. How much we take for granted as adults. Sharing ideas in a small group situation in class was very rewarding-one of the first classes of its kind for me.

"Thinking"

We were thinking about thinking. Sounds confusing. Yes, I found this class causing some confusion, perhaps better expressed as creating a lack of definition to the way I experience "thinking".

When you ask questions so much and question everything, I experience a loss of boundaries, as if there is nothing definitive or concrete. It made me wonder about the difference . . . between adults and children. We need the boundaries . . . They question in order to create boundaries for themselves to bring the pieces together for them. Adults need structure to keep the pieces in place. How can the adult enter into the child-world that he has long forgotten, and engage him (the child) at his level which is open to experience?

"Indoctrination"

It seems to me there is a fine line between where indoctrination starts and/or how much free choice we allow children. How much free choice can we assume responsibility for? Do we want to? Can the adult be open to the child's point of view -- understanding where he comes from? Can he do this without fearing his autonomy and authority questioned?

Indoctrination takes very subtle forms. Looking at parent-child relationships, e.g. Tony's father who wants his son to be an engineer, Tony is seduced through the fact that he is good in math.

It seems that indoctrination causes resistance and (the production of) puppets. Openness and choice lead to thoughtful, reflective decisions, in keeping with one's best interests. Perhaps the child is "readier" than the adult for Philosophy in the class-room. The adult needs to be "tripped loose".

I was thinking tonight, as I brushed my teeth, how unusual and rare an opportunity it is to role-play in class. Was this not a sort of "subtle indoctrination" for promoting critical questioning within ourselves?

Your class is largely unstructured (oh hum) and so you urge that the structure and format come from us, thereby encouraging responsibility for how it goes. In a sense you take away the boundaries, another "subtle indoctrination."

Something interesting goes on this class, almost a dual existence. It is as if we are forced to operate on two levels, adult and child. Philosophizing with children teaches the adult about philosophy, bringing us back to a former, but more alive way of viewing the world around us.

"Meaning"

For some reason, I found myself "dry" without interest in this chapter, unable to formulate questions. I felt blocked. As I was writing this down, I began to question and wonder why I was having this problem with this discussion.

Is one's mind always open to searching and awareness? Why do we lose interest? Was it the chapter, the class interaction? Why couldn't I bring meaning to this chapter? Was it true that this discussion was uninteresting? I felt now I had done something with the experience if only to question its lack of appeal to me. When I brought the feeling to something personal, thinking took place and interest. Now I had the answer for myself. The subject has to have some bearing on one's personal experience. In this case my disinterest was personal to me.

Is this how learning takes place? Bringing relevance to the person, the child in the class room. If a subject is boring for a child, why is it? Which subjects are not? What is the difference for him? What is the difference in the subject? Anything can be used for philosophical questioning with some ingenuity on the part of a teacher.

Truth, thinking, indoctrination and meaning, aspects central to a course in Philosophy for Children, have begun to be recognized, reflectively thought about and critically applied. Certainly, Philosophy for Children is not just for children.

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