

Leading A Philosophical Discussion

The nine principles enumerated below form the core of classroom methodology in any participatory philosophical discussion appropriate to a pre-college setting. They have been taken from the Teacher's Manual of a soon to be available literature based critical thinking and evaluative reasoning text, *THE FIELDSTON ETHICS READER*, edited by myself and Beatrice Banu and published by the Ethical Culture Schools. Although most of these principles are contained either implicitly or explicitly in the manuals for IAPC material and various published books and papers on Philosophy for Children, they have never, to my knowledge, been clearly enumerated and presented as conditions necessary for philosophical discussions that reflect the centrality of participatory and non-indoctrinating classroom practices and the formation of a Community of Inquiry. Hopefully, these conditions, presented starkly and without compromise, will furnish a core that defines the essence of a non-didactic and philosophical approach based on the insight of Lipman and others. Such an approach, whether utilizing IAPC materials or other sources more congenial to particular school settings could then serve as a means of distinguishing between programs consistent with the ideals of philosophical thinking in Lipman's sense and other approaches to critical thinking or reasoning skills development.

1. *Support Students' Right To Speak.*

The single most crucial aspect of a philosophical discussion is that the student be convinced that she has the right to speak out without fear of penalty, whether the intellectual penalty of being considered wrong or the psychological penalty of ridicule. It is absolutely necessary that every student be convinced that the teacher sees the class as a community of inquiry, joint enterprise whose goal is truth and clarification. Given that, any idea is worthwhile — including "wrong" ideas, since even silly or mistaken ideas can help others to articulate more adequate points of view. The teacher should tolerate any and all ideas put forward by the class. That is not to say that all ideas are equally correct, appropriate or thoughtful, but that the worth of an idea is not decided prior to its being expressed. Ideas can only be considered after they have been heard. Therefore all ideas are given a fair hearing in philosophical discussions.

2. *Mutual Respect Is Essential.*

The only limit on student expression is lack of respect for each other. Disagreements are essential to critical discourse, but they must not be personal. Positions may be wrong, but people who hold them are not to be abused. The focus of discussion must remain squarely on the issue, not on the personalities of the persons involved. This rule is even more imperative for the teacher to follow. Never belittle a student in any way, never use abusive terms to characterize a student or the student's position, no matter how strongly you feel about it. A community of inquiry demands a commitment to the rational criticism of views, if a view is despicable, it

is the obligation of those who abhor it to find powerful reasons to support their abhorrence.

3. *Require That Students Give Reasons.*

The freedom of philosophical inquiry is counterbalanced by the obligation to support positions with reasons. The nature of the topics and methods of philosophical inquiry require that even the obvious be open to question. Therefore students should be prepared to support their positions by publicly offering grounds that others can see and evaluate. This does not require an endless regress of reasons supporting reasons. Rather it requires that any position be open to question.

4. *Demand That Students Listen To Each Other.*

If the class is to become a community of inquiry, all students must feel the obligation to participate. That does not require that all students should be equally verbal, but that all students should be equally thoughtful. Decentering the class from student-teacher interactions so that student-student interactions occur most of the time is the key to successful philosophical dialogue. For that to happen students must feel that they are expected to listen to the opinions of their fellows.

5. *The Teacher's Position Counts As One.*

The teacher's position on matters of substance is presented openly and considered like any other. There can be no hidden agendas or covert preferences. Nothing is more destructive to critical thinking and moral inquiry than students who are trying to guess what answer pleases the teacher. The teacher must be even-handed and thoughtfully attentive when moderating philosophical — neither lavishing praise nor severe censure when responding to students. The teacher should support with careful attention, all students' right to present opinions. The burden of exploration and criticism should be placed firmly upon the members of the class.

6. *Take Responsibility For Leading Discussions*

Although within the discussion the teacher's opinion is no better than anyone else's, as the moderator, the teacher does not relinquish the responsibility of structuring discussion. The teacher should openly reinforce desirable kinds of discussion behavior. Clear and well argued opinions should be praised as a model for classroom performance, as well as sensitivity to distinctions and relevance to the issues at hand. This is not to contradict what has been said earlier. Teachers should not force the class to accept positions on issues under discussion. But the teacher has every right to insist that discussions be as intelligent as possible, and part of this insistence is making students aware of the occurrence of thoughtful and well presented opinions.

7. *Follow the Students' Interests.*

Critical thinking skills occur most naturally when people are engaged in discussions that are meaningful to them. For this reason we require that the student response to the readings form the basis for classroom discussion. A community of inquiry grows most readily when the process of inquiry itself defines the issues around which the dialogue is to take place. As a member of the community of inquiry,

the teacher has the right to present topics for the consideration of the group, but the teacher should be sensitive to the students' thoughts and interests. If a topic is really crucial, the teacher should rely on its inherent interest to spark discussion. Demanding that a topic be discussed usually results in a forced and artificial discussion. Student interest is the best guide to developmental appropriateness as well as the most likely generator of deep and meaningful interchange.

8. Engage as Many Students in the Discussion as Possible.

Keeping order within a philosophical discussion is difficult. As a rule of thumb a student who has not spoken should be called on at the first sign of a raised hand. Similarly, students who rarely speak should be permitted to speak ahead of students who contribute often. Do not call on a student more often than others just because you believe that she is more apt to have a "good" answer. If some students are shown preference, others will soon come to believe that their opinions are less valuable.

9. Treasure Discussion Time.

Students frequently see discussions as trivial. Real school work is seen as written and graded. Such an attitude is devastating to the success of any critical thinking program based on discussion. The teacher therefore must compensate for this attitude by highlighting the importance of classroom discussion. One simple device is to treat discussion times as you do important examinations. Do not permit intrusions during discussion; place a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door; do not permit students to read or do homework during discussion. Never do paperwork during discussions, even if you are not actively participating.

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