TOOLS FOR IMPROVING STUDENT DISCUSSION OR HELPING STUDENTS AND TEACHERS CREATE A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

> *Students take a largely rational approach to learning. They consider what is required of them, they decide on priorities, and they act accordingly. The teacher plays an important part in forming their perceptions of what is required and what is important, and it is this, as much as their style of presenting the subject-matter, which influences what and how their students learn. (D. Laurillard in Marton, et al., 1984, p. 143)*

INTRODUCTION

What is required of students in a discussion and what is important about a discussion can be defined in part by curiosity and transparency. First, discussion needs to be permeated by curiosity. This curiosity can be thought of as a kind of "ignorance". "A philosophy for children discussion should be, to some extent, rooted in what Whitehead calls a sort of 'ignorance'. There should be some question that is not yet answered, some problem not yet solved." (Reed, 1985, p. 229) Without curiosity on the part of the teacher and the students, any discussion will be lifeless and its potential for developing greater understanding or uncovering new insight will be very limited. Next, transparency is an essential ingredient if a discussion is to be improved. A transparent discussion is one with a visible structure. The visible structure of a discussion allows students and teacher to be actively involved in its improvement. The more transparent a discussion, the more likely it is that the discussion can be improved.

These two themes will be used to look at some specific tools which allow for the development and maintenance of curiosity. Some tools will be presented which will provide an aid to the teacher in making components of a discussion visible or transparent. This article contends that the overall purpose of improving discussion is not an end in itself, but rather as a vehicle for the observation and improvement of student thinking. Therefore, curiosity and transparency are seen as ways of aiding in the improvement of student thinking.

ABOUT CURIOSITY

Discussions provide an ideal chance for the observation of student thinking. Watching students as they think is a central theme of this paper. Eleanor Duckworth presents an idea important to the continuing development of teacher skills in the classroom. The idea is "teaching as research." This may sound like something which is "pie in the sky" and not something which the harried classroom teacher has the time or the inclination to accomplish. It is important to notice that Duckworth is not saying that, in addition to everything else a teacher is and/or should be doing, s/he should also be a researcher. Duckworth is saying that teaching *is* a form of research. "If as a researcher, one is interested in how people build their understanding, then the way to gain insight is to watch them do it, and try to make sense of it as it happens (to paraphrase Armstrong, 1980)" (Duckworth, p. 490, 1986) Perhaps this is what all teaching is about, certainly it is an important part of what teaching Philosophy for

Children is about. Duckworth's idea about teaching as research is very similar to one of John Dewey's ideas. Dewey says someplace that teachers should know the subject matter well enough so they can watch students as they learn.

It is an idea so simple and yet so illusive. To maintain the curiosity about the students' thinking (which might sometimes appear as a lack of thinking) is a difficult task, but one which has its rewards. One of the advantages of a community of inquiry is, if things are working well, other students will also be interested in understanding how and/or what their fellow students are thinking. Thus, the class can work together as researchers. This, however, can only be accomplished if the teacher models curious behavior. Duckworth gives us some guidelines as we begin to look at ways in which curiosity might be kept alive.

Duckworth observed six outcomes when students explain their work to the teacher rather than the teacher explaining the subject to the students. These characteristics can also provide a set of criteria for a successful discussion as they focus on the role of curiosity, or teacher as researcher. First, students will have clarified things to themselves in the process of clarifying things to others. Second, students have determined what it is they want to understand. Next, students will learn to depend on themselves and on each other: they are the judges of what they know and believe. Forth, students recognize the powerful experience of having their ideas taken seriously by the teacher *and* their fellow students. Fifth, students learn from each other. Finally, students come to recognize knowledge as a human product, since they have produced their own knowledge and they know that they have. (Duckworth, pp 487-488, 1986)

Karel Van der Leeuw and Pieter Mostert in their recent article in Analytic Teaching (1987) provide a good example of what is meant here by curiosity. This article, though using transcripts as the source, is shaped by the authors' sense of curiosity about an issue which is often thought of as a "given" within Philosophy for Children; that is, "there is no fundamental difference between the thinking of adults and the thinking of children: both make use of the same mental operations." (Van der Leeuw and Mostert, 1987, p. 93) I invite the reader to look closely at their article in order to see curiosity at work. The important point for our understanding of curiosity as developed here is the close attention the authors pay to the words, the contexts and the possible meanings of student statements. The authors both pay close attention to what the students say and, at the same time, place the students' discussion within a larger framework. Now the reader may think that a teacher cannot become that involved in exploring the thinking processes of a child (maybe not), but the point is that we should be alert for these possibilities this exploration offers: for teaching philosophy for children is teaching thinking. Therefore, these questions deserve our careful consideration. More importantly, the type of inquiry involved in the examination of Piagetian operations will provide the teacher with an endless list of things to be curious about.

In the same issue of Analytic Teaching, Pierre Lebuis (1987) discusses "Anthropo-pedagogical approaches to teacher training." I will quote an entire paragraph from Lebuis as it exemplifies the definition of curiosity being developed here.

> *Dr. Morin proposes four principles for efficiency of "anthropo-pedagogy". First, the person responsible for the research must be in a state of questioning rather than verification. Second, the searcher must go beyond mere observation; he has to immerse himself in the process to be able to construct his own judgment with the people of the milieu engaged in the*

> *research. Thirdly, the research must be concieved as a research of "meanings" for understanding what goes on in an educational milieu. Finally, as the searcher is himself implied in the research, he has to use a variety of instruments for collecting data. These principles suggest trends in the perspective of a "modernization" of teacher training in philosophy for children....(p. 64) (Emphasis mine.)*

I see us as teacher trainers as applying these ideas to the daily activities of the classroom and especially to our understanding of student discussions. The idea of a searcher as opposed to a researcher as discussed above best exemplifies the role of curiosity in understanding and leading a discussion. Pierre Lebuis' article deserves careful reading and will further our understanding of the teacher as possessed by curiosity.

ABOUT TRANSPARENCY

How do we make the workings of a discussion visible to students? Judy Kyle (1983, 1985), in her writing about discussion, shows some ways in which she has involved students in the structure of a discussion. Her work implicitly builds on the type of curiosity Duckworth, Lebuis, Van der Leeuw and Mostert outline and represents some of the best thinking available on improving the quality of discussion. This paper owes much to Kyle's work on discussion.

Moves. One example of Kyle's contribution to improving discussions is teaching students to understand and use "moves" (1983, 1985). The idea of a "move" itself is important as it captures an important components of discussions in a way which is understandable to children and adults. A move in chess or in a discussion is an act made with a goal in mind; the goal is to propel the game or discussion forward. According to Kyle (1985), "the term 'move' suggests a good move in a game and the idea here is for children to learn specific ways to pay attention to what it is the *other* person is saying rather than (or in addition to) formulating their own thoughts." (p. 5) For students to be aware that a discussion moves forward toward greater understanding, more information, a shared experience or other kinds of resolution, or at least tentative answers is an important accomplishment. Although many students will know the purpose of a discussion on some level, this awareness is not something that can be expected. Most students will not be able to articulate reasons why a discussion is better for some types of learning than is reading or listening to the teacher.

Knowledge by Design. "Knowledge by design" (Perkins, 1987, in Baron and Sternberg) provides one way to help students and teachers better understand the nature of a discussion by seeing some of the components which might go into a discussion. This approach is a method for teaching thinking and is, therefore, particularly well suited to the improvement of discussions. D. N. Perkins of the Harvard School of Education developed this method as a way to aid teachers in teaching about and students in learning difficult concepts. The method has four separate elements: 1) purpose, 2) structure, 3) model, and 4) argument.

First, questions of purpose are raised. Why, that is, for what purpose do we have a discussion? Are their multiple purposes for a discussion? This step may appear to be self-evident and, therefore, not important, a step to be side-stepped, so to speak. It is, however, an important step because even though the students may know the purpose of a discussion in a tacit way, some will not, and tacit knowledge made explicit becomes more useable.

Additionally, one of the things which we find out as we begin to explore the purpose of a discussion is that there are several kinds of discussions with quite different purposes. For example, what are the particular qualities of a philosophical discussion? A clarification or defining discussion "designed" to give shape to a "fuzzy" concept may be philosophical. Debates which are intended to demonstrate the relative merits of several different positions may also be philosophic in nature. Likewise, sharing discussion for the purpose of showing others how you think or feel about a topic and also to learn how others think and feel about that same topic may be considered philosophical. There are other types of discussion as well. It is important to note that, althought any discussion may have all three (or more) of Perkin's elements in it, if the discussion changes from being mostly clarifying to being mostly debating, the class is doing a different task as will become more clear as we begin to look at structure.

What is the structure of a discussion? Another way to ask this questions is: what does a discussion look like? Students may not have thought about this point before. Only the defining discussion will be examined here. How would I know one if I saw one? What is the shape of the beginning, middle and end of a defining discussion? Is there one way in which defining discussion proceeds from beginning to end? These are some of the questions which might be explored as the class examines the structure of a discussion. These questions might be asked in slightly modified form of different types of discussion.

A model case is an idea familiar to Philosophy for Children teachers. To understand a discussion in terms of a model class can be a powerful experience. It also may be a difficult task for the students as many, perhaps most of the students, will not have experienced or observed a discussion which approaches a model. This is a reason why a "knowledge by design" discussion should wait until you have had several discussions in class. The students need something to draw on. A model needs to be built based on some experience, whether real or vicarious. Again, one type of discussion should be the initial focus. Other types of discussion may be eventually discussed; one at a time. There are a number of methods for establishing a model case which might be used and will not be presented here. What one looks for in a model case are those salient features of the case which distinguish it as exemplary.

While a model discussion is best arrived at through the exchange of ideas, some components of a model discussion are presented in the hopes of continuing a dialogue with colleagues about the nature of discussions. A model discussion is permeated with curiosity. Ideally, all participants in a discussion are both interested in the topic and in understanding what the discussant thinks about the topic. Next, a good discussion is characterized by a commitment to resolution. This does not imply that a good discussion will be resolved or even that the topic under discussion can be resolved, but rather that it is committed to move in the direction of resolution. It is this sense of commitment to resolution which provides the second leg to support a quality discussion. These legs, to extend the analogy, ought to be balanced; balanced by wide participation, give and take, listening and speaking, forward movement and reconsideration. To enable this to occur, a model discussion should be visible to the participant and, therefore, accessible to improvement. What I have attempted here is to use Duckworth's criteria stated above in a manner more applicable to discussion. This is not intended to be a definitive model of a discussion, only as a point of departure. Again the work of Judy Kyle and Ron Reed in this area is important. (Kyle, 1983 and 1985, and Reed, 1985)

Finally, arguments - what arguments explain the purpose of a discussion and what arguments evaluate that purpose? A simple explanatory argument might be that discussion brings many points of view to the surface and provides an organized method for sorting out these points of view. There are others. The point of explanation here is to give reasons for a discussion. Evaluative arguments look to relative strengths of discussion over reading, teacher presentation, or other method of learning. It might be helpful at this point to also look at weaknesses of discussion or places where discussion is not appropriate or at least less useful. In like manner, conversation might be compared to discussion so as to examine some of the subtle points of discussion.

The concept of "knowledge by design" has some uses in a discussion classroom beyond defining a discussion. For example, a "move", as defined by Judy Kyle (1983, 1985), might also be placed into the "knowledge by design" organization to mention just one possibility. Any concept may be explored by this method, I cited the discussion and the "move" examples as they serve double duty; they are examples which use a technique within a discussion to improve a discussion.

Cooperative Learning. In their work on cooperative learning, Johnson and Johnson (1987) offer some suggestions for dealing with controversial topics which might be helpful. Cooperation is an implicit element of a discussion which can be made explicit. As students are able to articulate ways in which they may be helpful in a discussion, they can take active control over improving it. Perhaps these points will come out in the "knowledge by design" discussion or Judy Kyle's "discussion on discussions" (1983). They are presented here to provide some backup ideas for the teacher. Johnson and Johnson suggest: 1) defining controversy in terms of a proble solving situation in which differences need to be clarified, rather than as "win-lose" conflicts in which one person's ideas have to dominate, 2) being critical of ideas and not persons, 3) moving the discussion from differentiation (bringing out ideas) to integration (putting ideas together) to evaluating strengths and weaknesses of ideas, and 4) taking the point of view of others so as to understand their perspective (Johnson and Johnson, pp. 122-123, 1987).

THINKING SKILLS AND DISCUSSION

Lipman, in "Ethical Reasoning and the Craft of Moral Practice," (1987) suggests three specific types of thinking skills which are a part of the craft of moral practice: reasoning skills, inquiry skills, and concept-formation skills. Each of these skills will be explored with an eye to ways in which the tools mentioned above may be used for the improvement of discussion.

Reasoning skills include "classification, definition, question-formation, giving examples and counter-examples, identifying similarities and differences, constructing and criticizing analogies, comparing and contrasting and drawing valid inferences" (Lipman, p. 144, 1987). Examples and counter-examples are examples of discussion "moves". Students can be taught most effectively by having the teacher and eventually the students pointing out the use of examples and counter-examples when they are used appropriately. Almost all of the reasoning skills may be seen as "moves" and used to propel a discussion forward. They are, in fact, ways in which we "reason together." Likewise, "knowledge by design" may be used to aid in the development of these skills. Appropriate use of examples and counter-examples can sometimes be a problem. It is

easy for an example to degenerate into a "war story" or a "Family Hour." "Knowledge by design" might easily be used to aid students in understanding the nature and use of examples and counter-examples.

Inquiry skills are "proficient in such areas as description, explanation, problem-formation, hypotehsis-formation, measurement and the like" (Lipman, p. 144, 1987). Problem-formation will be looked at here as it is one of the skills least developed in formal education and it is an important skill in the "real world" (Sternberg, 1985). Problem-formation is the process of moving from a "fuzzy" situation to the isolation of a problem to be addressed. Problem-formation has the further *advantage* of not fitting neatly into the model. I am not able to easily apply the "knowledge by design" to this situation, nor can I see how to make a "move" which would explain problem-formation easily. However, from my own experience, I have noticed problem-formation occurring in discussion. It is my observation that when problems are formulated, it is as a result of curiosity on the part of the discussants. It is a part of a community of inquiry but does not have a "tool" which can be easily used to insure that it will happen. It is important to remember as we look at ways of improving a discussion that discussions, in addition to being transparent and assessable to improvement through techniques or tools, also are an organic whole which cannot be dissected.

Finally, concept-formation skills are defined as ways of consolidating thought. A summary then can be an important discussion move. Summary, consolidation, may happen in a number of phases during the discussion, not just at the end. Consolidation helps to address such questions as: What tentative conclusions have been reached? Where have we been? Where do we go from here? How does this point relate to other points? Other discussions? Other topics? In examining these questions relating to concept formation, it is also important to bring the idea of enriched understanding to the attention of students. In other words, the skeletal definition which the discussion explored may not be much different from the definition which provided the starting point for the discussion, *but* the depth and richness of our understanding of the concept may have been greatly increased. A summary, on at least some occasions, might examine richness of understanding.

SOME IDEAS...

Discussions are planned activities. Planning a discussion means, in part, selecting topics which are appropriate for discussion, choosing the correct sequence in the development of a point for discussion to occur, and being aware of some alternative to discussion which might either redirect or energize the discussion and/or be used as a substitute for the discussion. Discussions are not efficient if our goal is to cover a given amount of material. They are only one of several ways of introducing new ideas. Discussion may be one way to summarize and solidify learning.

With these points in mind, let us examine the tools and make some application of the tools to the points listed above. The definition of terms lends itself to discussion. "Knowledge by design" can obviously be used to define terms and concepts. This may be accomplished by individual students' seat work as well as by discussion (see Perkins for more on ways to use "knowledge by design"). Sometimes students might work through the "knowledge by design" steps individually before they engage in a discussion. Likewise, it may be done entirely within the confines of a discussion. Whether one approach is used or another will depend on the difficulty of the concept, how familiar students are with it, and how intrinsically interesting the idea is to the

students. A difficult concept might be introduced by some teacher talk or by involving students in some problems like those found in Philosophical Inquiry.

Students and teacher might look back over a discussion by using the criteria established by Johnson and Johnson. Questions like: did we engage in a win-lose debate when we should have been defining a problem? Did we criticize the person rather than the idea? Did the discussion move from differentiation to integration? And, did students take the point of view of others so as to understand their perspective? These might be asked at the end of a discussion period (Johnson and Johnson, pp. 122-123, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Curiosity and transparency are illusive commodities but if we succeed in making them important parts of our classroom discussion, we have the potential for improving not only the quality of the discussion but the quality of thinking, both our own and our students'.

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Note: This article assumes the reader is familiar with Philosophy in the Classroom. This work is the beginning place for all my understanding of discussion.