PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN TEACHER-TRAINING A MODEL FROM HAWAII

Beginning 1988, I tried an approach to teacher-training in Philosophy for Children which, though labor-intensive, was very rewarding. It involved: (1) a one-semester course in Philosophy for Children prior to program implementation, (2) twelve to fifteen visits to each classroom during the implementation year to conduct demonstration lessons and observe teacher performance, and (3) a journal and commentary on classroom visits, which was shared on a regular basis with the teachers. The scope of the project was partly what made it so "labor-intensive." It included eleven teachers at six schools and nearly 250 children.

THE COURSE

In the spring of 1988, I offered a course in Philosophy for Children as a part of my regular teaching load at the University. To do this, I took advantage of a "special topics" course listing in the catalogue--Phil 494. Phil 494 has no prerequisites, carries three upper division credits, and can be repeated for credit with the consent of the instructor. The topic of the course can be anything of interest to the instructor, provided that it meets with the approval of the Department. In the past, I have used Phil 494 to offer courses in, among other things, Harry, Lisa and Mark.

This time, I decided to teach Elfie and Pixie. I scheduled Phil 494 for Wednesday evenings from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. to make it possible for teachers and other working people to attend. Twenty students enrolled in the class, including two philosophy majors, some fifth year education certificate students, and twelve teachers.

A considerable amount of groundwork was required to recruit the teachers for the course. This began with a visit in the fall of 1987 to the district superintendent, who was impressed enough with the Philosophy for Children program to provide staff development funds for tuition and books for the teachers. He also gave me a letter of introduction to local school principals. Armed with this letter, I went in person to seven local schools and met with the principals to explain the program and solicit their recommendations of teachers to participate. Once I received the recommendations, I invited the teachers to an informational gathering at a local school library where I conducted a demonstration lesson from Chapter 1 of Elfie and answered questions about the program.

Of the fifteen teachers recommended by their principals, twelve attended the meeting, and all of these enrolled in Phil 494. They did so with the understanding that they would implement the Philosophy for Children program in their classrooms during the following school year. Of the teachers who enrolled, only one dropped out. All the others completed the course with honor grades and went on to fulfill their commitment to use the program in the classroom during the school year.

The course was a pleasure to teach. In the beginning, I started each session with an introductory lecture before moving to the reading and discussion of the curriculum materials. The lectures dealt primarily with the nature of philosophical discussion. Here I relied heavily on my understanding of the Celenchus of Socrates as well as on some of the writings of Matt Lipman and others. As time went by, I dropped these introductory lectures entirely, and proceeded directly to the curriculum at the beginning of each class.

I led the class through the curriculum in much the same way I normally lead a class of children--getting them to take turns reading through each chapter of the novel, eliciting the main ideas in each episode, focusing on a topic of special interest, shifting to the manual to use a relevant exercise or discussion plan, and so on.

I continued this way for a month or two until the students began to look like they were "catching on" to how to have a philosophical discussion. Then I circulated a sign-up sheet, and asked the students to schedule themselves to conduct their own demonstration lessons with the class. Normally there were two forty-minute demonstration lessons scheduled for each class session. After each demonstration lesson--at the break or after class--I took the student aside and made comments about his or her performance.

When the teachers first began doing their demonstration lessons, several of them revealed that they had been using their current elementary school classes for rehearsals! The teachers were trying out the curriculum on the kids before they tried it out in our class. This "rehearsal" idea caught on quickly, and soon all the teachers were using it and reporting on the results comparing the reactions of the children to the reactions of our college class, describing what worked and what didn't work with the kids, and so on. This was an eventuality I hadn't planned on, but clearly it had a salutary effect. Until now, the Philosophy for Children program was in the realm of theory as far as the teachers were concerned. But when they tried it on the kids and saw the results for themselves, their confidence in the program increased, and they began to look forward with greater assurance to using the program "for real" during the following school year.

Demonstration lessons counted toward one-third of the total grade in my class. Another third was based on original written exercises and discussion plans in Philosophy for Children, which I required in lieu of term papers. I encouraged the teachers to use the examples in the manuals as a model, but to give me something new. I wanted them to experience the sort of thinking that goes into the design of an original philosophical exercise. In this way, perhaps, they could become more independent of the manuals. Some of the teachers' ideas were quite good, though they tended to be more empirical than philosophical. Class participation made up the remaining third of the grade. Most of the teachers made rapid progress in this area. Having some undergraduate philosophy majors in the class was a tremendous help here--particularly those two students, who were truly skillful dialecticians, i.e., clever but not obnoxious. Whenever we discussed an episode from one of the novels or went through an exercise in the manual, the philosophy majors usually took the discussion a step further or a level higher than it might have gone otherwise. It was good to have an impetus of this kind coming from members of the class and not just from the instructor.

It should be clear by now that my approach to teacher-training was basically one of "learning by doing." I spent very little time on theory--i.e., on talking about philosophy or about pedagogy. Instead, I tried to teach the class by example and through practice by leading the students in philosophical discussions on curriculum materials and by providing them with feedback on their own demonstration lessons. This is how I learned to teach Philosophy for Children from IAPC.

The teachers, as it turned out, were not very satisfied with this approach. Their teaching evaluations indicated that they wanted more "content"--lectures on straight philosophy, philosophical pedagogy or both. As a result, I have resolved to try to do more of this kind of thing in the future.

Looking back on it, I think that there was really just one main benefit to offering an entire course in philosophy for children prior to program implementation. The teachers were able to go into the classroom in the following school year with a complete overview of the curriculum they were going to use. Of course, they could have done this by attending a pre-program workshop, too. But the semester-long course had two advantages over a workshop: (1) it allowed teachers time to fully digest the curriculum materials, and (2) it gave the teachers the chance to try out the curriculum

on a "rehearsal" basis with children in their current classes.

CLASSROOM SESSIONS

Class sessions lasted between thirty and forty minutes and were almost entirely based on IAPC curriculum materials. In Grades K-3, we used Elfie, and in Grades 4 and 5, the children read Pixie. Normally, the children took turns reading aloud, and covered about one episode--a small section of a chapter--at each session. Readings from Elfie and Pixie were used as a springboard for class discussions and for philosophical exercises and activities from the accompanying teachers' manuals. The teachers observed my discussions with the kids, and they used the curriculum with the children themselves an average of twice per week. During the 1988-1989 school year, I made between twelve and fifteen visits to each of the eleven classes involved in the program--over a hundred and fifty in all. The primary purpose of these visits was to conduct demonstration lessons for the teachers.

Teachers paid close attention to the lessons I conducted with the children and went on to use some of my techniques in their own lessons with the kids. The most important thing they learned from me was to challenge the children's answers to questions. In the beginning, the teachers tended to lead philosophical discussion as if they were taking an opinion poll ("Justin, what do you think about that? Ahh, that's interesting! And what do you think, Haunani? That's interesting, too!"). But after watching me in action with for a while, the teachers began to ask philosophical follow-up questions ("Why do you say that?", "How do you know?", "What do you mean?"). In certain cases, they even went so far as to raise criticisms, by posing Creductios and counter-examples. The teachers had the confidence to try these techniques because the kids had proven themselves to be able to understand and respond to questions and criticisms of this kind in their conversations with me. And my lessons with the kids helped to pave the way for the teachers to try these techniques by getting the kids used to them.

The secondary purpose of my classroom visits was to monitor teacher performance. The number of visits devoted to this activity varied from class to class. Some teachers were eager to conduct demonstration lessons, and did so every other visit. Other teachers were extremely nervous about being "evaluated" in this way, and were willing to conduct only a few sessions of this kind. Each teacher conducted at least three demonstration lessons during the year.

As one might expect, it was the teachers who conducted demonstration lessons the most often who usually made the greatest progress. In the beginning, most of the teachers had no idea of what it was like to conduct a discussion with their classes. Teachers who were quite good at leading discussions with adults during our class at the University the previous spring were terrible at it when they tried to do it with their own pupils. Their tendency was to overprepare, with the result that the spontaneity of a genuine philosophical discussion was lost. They also didn't trust the intellectual abilities of the kids.

At the beginning of the school year, one teacher had actually prepared butcher paper charts listing the main ideas in the reading in advance of asking the kids to tell her what they were. She told me later that she saw the process of asking the children for the main ideas as a device for getting them to come up with the ideas she had already outlined! When I criticized this practice, the teacher volunteered to conduct further demonstration lessons on a regular basis, alternating with me, in an effort to improve her performance. By the end of the year she had improved her skills to the point where she was able to have a real philosophical discussion with her pupils. Similar progress was evident among other teachers who were able to see their own demonstration lessons as an opportunity to get some feedback about their teaching,

rather than as an occasion for dread.

THE JOURNAL

I first began keeping a diary of my visits as a means of remembering the many interesting experiences I was having with the kids. After leading a discussion with the children, or observing a discussion led by one of the teachers, I recorded my recollections on tape, and then wrote them up in diary form. As time went by, I began sending these entries--one by one--to the teachers. By openly sharing my evaluations of my own successes and failures, I hoped to shed further light on the goals and methods of the program. I also wanted to provide the teachers with written critiques of their demonstration lessons with the kids.

At the end of the Fall Semester, and again at the end of the school year, I compiled the diary entries into a journal, and circulated copies of the journal to the teachers. I organized the journal into chapters--one for each class. Classroom visits were presented in chronological order and chapters were presented in order of ascending grade level. The journal served three main functions.

(1) By providing accounts of my own discussions with the children, I was able to give the teachers a way of seeing these discussions "from the inside." I could explain my motives for asking certain kinds of questions, for changing the subject when I did, or for probing some issues and not others. I was also able to express disappointment over missed opportunities for philosophical exploration or satisfaction about a successful discussion. Finally, I was able to provide some analysis of where I had gone wrong--or right. I think these self-evaluative remarks gave the teachers a valuable insight into the "whys" as well as the "hows" of leading a philosophical discussion.

(2) My critiques of teacher-performance provided an important supplement to the oral feedback I gave the teachers after class. These after-class discussions often suffered from lack of time or opportunity for reflection. While there was a delay of several days in writing up my critiques and mailing them to the teachers, the quality of the commentary was better, I think, than anything I could have managed on the spot. And unlike oral comments, written comments can be received in private--a considerable advantage in comparison with face-to-face critiques, which are often clouded by anxiety. Written critiques can also be re-read, and are therefore less likely to be forgotten or misunderstood.

(3) The compiled journal, which was distributed twice during the year, provided the teachers with the opportunity to find out what was going on in other classes. The teachers seemed to appreciate this above all. They were extremely interested in comparing their own achievements with those of other teachers. And they seemed to gain a better understanding of the project once they got to see it as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This approach to teacher-training is expensive in terms of time and energy. From the "groundwork" in the fall of 1987 to the final compilation and distribution of the journal of class visits in June of 1989, the project took more than two academic years. Especially during the implementation year, the program consumed many hours per week in class visitation, travel time, and project coordination. Fortunately, I was able to get a one-course reduction from a normal three-course teaching load at the University to carry out these activities during the implementation year. This was helpful, but inadequate for the task.

The next time I do teacher-training in this setting, I think I'll make some changes in my approach. I'll do it on a smaller scale: half a dozen teachers, perhaps. To make up for this loss of "productivity," I'll try working faster. Instead of offering Phil 494 to the teachers in the spring before program implementation, I'll offer it in the fall of

the implementation year. This will involve sacrificing some of the benefits mentioned earlier. The teachers will no longer have a chance for "rehearsal" sessions with children, nor will they be able to begin implementation with a complete "overview" of the curriculum. For they will have to start using the program in the classroom before they have completed the course. This will, however, make it possible to train a new group of teachers every year instead of every two years. Given the constraints on program scale, this seems to me to be a compensating advantage. All the other advantages--the full-semester course, the classroom visits, the journal--can remain in place.

Barry Curtis