

TEACHER TRAINING: THE "PREFERRED FORMAT"

The notion of a "preferred format" for training is most fruitfully discussed within a context of what needs to be covered in order to begin to do Philosophy for Children in a responsible fashion. Attached is a form of "Training Manual" (TM) that is at the heart of the training that I do in Hawaii. This manual provides a framework that forms the basis of what I think teachers ultimately need to have an in-depth appreciation for, regardless of specific program, in order to faithfully carry out the program.

Because I have the luxury of knowing I will have at least one full year of weekly in-class contact with teachers (either myself directly, or through one of the philosophy graduate students working with me) I have begun teachers with a minimum of one day prior training before starting. This is emerging for me as a "preferred format" since it is coupled with the commitment by teachers who join the program that they will meet with me once a week for one and one-half hours to go over the various elements in the program. With this format and the attached training manual as a reference I am able to deal with as many as four programs simultaneously (Elfie, Kio& Gus, Pixie, and Harry).

SPECIFICS OF A TRAINING SESSION

Any training session needs to begin with a brief overview of the program (TM, p.1) and some statement of the program objectives (TM, p.2). At this stage I mention studies that indicate the high percentage of sanctioned classroom talk that is done by teachers (upwards of 95%) and the sorts of class time spent on various phases of the learning process (Presented by Clive Lindrop at the 2nd Philosophy for Children conference.)

The training then moves into introducing the framework (TM, p.3) per se. This framework has two important advantages:

1. it provides a common vocabulary and reference point for those doing Philosophy for Children and this in turn facilitates discussion for problematic areas;
2. the framework itself greatly facilitates the expansion of philosophical thinking into other content areas as well as into life beyond the classroom.

The framework is initially captured by the notion of a "Philosophical Cycle" (TM, p.3). A "Philosophical Cycle" contains three phases: Read, Question, Discussion. That is it! Any teacher engaged in doing philosophy will be in one of these three phases. This means that everything that follows both in the workshop and in the classroom can be placed in one of these three areas. Much of the training and ongoing encounter of teachers with the program aims at deepening our understanding of what is involved in each of these areas.

The introduction of these three areas in practice has made the job of the teachers a lot easier in a number of ways. One important area is in providing a principal or other administrator or parent who might visit the classroom with an initial way of orienting themselves to what they are about to see. If they happen to visit during the "Read" phase they will see or should be on the lookout for one set of behaviors and one set of objectives. If the class is in the "Question" phase, another set of expectations and objectives and behaviors can be expected. This is also especially true of the "Discussion" phase.

The main point is that the "Cycle" provides an ongoing reference point for everything else that occurs in the program. It also provides a framework for carrying

Philosophy for Children into other content areas, but more on this later.

"PLAIN VANILLA"

The next key document (TM, p.4) is contained in the idea of "Plain Vanilla." Plain Vanilla is an attempt to spell out in some detail what occurs in the carrying out of a philosophical cycle. The title "Plain Vanilla" is meant to suggest that there is a standard way of proceeding with a cycle. In part this is to accommodate those teachers who want fairly explicit directions as to how they are to proceed "Monday morning" and what they are to do next. Note that in "Step One" students read aloud from the text, taking turns, and reading either an episode, or a chapter, depending on the program.

The idea of "Plain Vanilla" is connected to the ice cream parlor in the sense that just as an ice cream parlor serves a variety of flavors, so there are a variety of ways in which to proceed with a given class. Hence one variation of "Read" in a serial fashion would be to do what I have heard referred to as "Reader's Theater." In this variation someone takes the part of narrator and then assigns parts according to the characters in the story who appear in that episode. This might be the "Marble Fudge" variation. Pick your own names for variations. The key point is that there isn't ONE RIGHT WAY to handle the "Read" part of a cycle. Another variation might be to read just a few sentences in a chapter or episode as the initiate, the "Question" phase. This might be the "Peaches 'n Cream" variation. The use of the ice cream analogy is also an effort to keep the process playful as well as to encourage the potential creativity that many teachers bring to the program.

I have begun to collect various "flavors" that the teachers have developed which are then shared among the teachers in the program. It provides a great source of cross fertilization. As anyone who works with teachers knows, they are brilliant at this sort of thing.

In connection with the "Read" phase it is important at some point that the teachers understand the importance of the reasons for reading aloud. This allows one to make concrete certain aspects of the Community of Inquiry such as provision for a common shared experience. It also provides a concrete illustration of how the program operationalizes the commitment to allowing students' voices to be more frequently heard in the classroom.

Doing this reading aloud also allows teachers to see how HELPFUL students can be to each other when a classmate who has some difficulty in reading is helped by his/her classmates.

An additional element of "Plain Vanilla", Step One is structural: the budding Community (students and teacher) should be arrayed in a circle or some similar arrangement so that they can see each other's faces. If at all possible the teacher should be seated at the same level as the students.

The completion of the reading, however short or long, marks the transition to Step Two, the "Question" phase.

Step Two, "Questions"

The "Plain Vanilla" Step Two questions are elicited from the students and these questions are written on the board by the teacher along with the student's name and the line number which triggered the question.

The area of questioning is clearly a very large one and is a key strength of the program and one that needs to be constantly developed as the program unfolds. In the context of "Plain Vanilla" and a first run through with the whole process, it is important to stress that at this stage the effort is to have the STUDENTS ask the questions and that ANY QUESTION IS OK, AND IS TO BE WRITTEN ON THE BOARD EXACTLY AS IT COMES FROM THE STUDENT. If grammatical corrections

are required, leave it be unless it is brought to the attention of the community by another student.

It is also important to stress that there is NO RUSH to get the questions on the board. Teachers are familiar with the idea of "wait time" and this is an important context in which to exercise that notion. The hesitations, reformulations, etc., are all part of the process of moving toward clarity and this phase is in part trying to allow students and the classroom to rediscover this important aspect of inquiry. The formulation of questions, especially good questions, takes time. In the context of Philosophy for Children in this and other phases, we are NOT in a rush to get anywhere. The "Question" phase is the first indication to students of what the "agenda" is here and so must be done with great care.

Suggested variations on Plain Vanilla, "Question" phase include (you pick the flavor):

Having students write their question(s) on a sheet of paper which is handed in to the teacher. The teacher then types all the questions on a single sheet of paper and then makes copies for all the students. Another variation has the students break into group of two or more to come up with a question or set of questions between them. (This is important in Hawaii among certain ethnic groups who have difficulty as individuals in trying to formulate their own question. It is a mark of progress when later in the year individual students do formulate their own question.)

Note that Step Three is optional. Some teachers have found that from time to time it was useful to ask their students to group their questions according to categories of their choosing. In lower grades this has made a nifty group activity with scissors and paste as groups cut apart their copy of the class's questions and then compared their various categorizations.

Step 4

When as in "Plain Vanilla" a list of questions has been generated a new important phase begins: the STUDENTS select the question they would like to begin with. This is an important statement to a class of who is really going to "own" these sessions. Unlike probably any other aspect of the curriculum, they will be playing a major role in the selection of both the content and the direction of the inquiry. On the "Plain Vanilla" model, students (and teacher, of course) are allowed to vote for two questions. Simple majority decides.

In preparation for the first discussion (if not before), I encourage the teachers to introduce the following words which from that point will play a key role in the developing dynamics of the class. These are: IDUS, SPLAT, POPAAT, and OMT. "IDUS" stands for I Don't Understand. This can be called out at virtually any time in response to something said. So much passes in a classroom that is not understood, yet saying "I don't understand." in that formulation carries such a negative charge that it is seldom uttered (even though many have in fact not understood!). "IDUS" is free of all those negative charges and quickly becomes a powerful call for clarification. (Its use, teachers note with satisfaction, soon spreads to other content areas.)

The next word "SPLAT", indicates, as I tell the teachers and students, that "what you said travelled about six inches beyond your lips and went "splat" onto the floor." More prosaically it means "would you speak a little louder?" It is remarkable, given the potential lung capacity of most children, how many of them lose this in the classroom and speak in a tone hardly above a whisper. Saying "splat" becomes a playful way of encouraging greater volume from the reticent.

As those who do Philosophy for Children soon discover, once a group realizes that we are serious in our interest in what they have to say, the next problem tends to be in "Controlling the Classroom Clamor", as Ruth Silver puts it. "POPAAT" was created by a group of 3rd graders and means: Please, One Person At A Time. When someone says "POPAAT", this is a signal that everyone is to stop talking and the last sanctioned speaker can begin again.

"OMT" simply means "One More Time", and serves as a variant combination of "IDUS", and "SPLAT."

Armed with this additional vocabulary, the Community is ready to begin. At this point one proceeds either to Step 4 (a) or (b) depending upon whether or not the search for a tie-in with the manual was found.

Step 4 (a)

The easier case is when such a connection is found. Assume now, that the group has read episode 1 of Pixie and "Names" has come up as the topic of choice. The manual Discussion Plan "Names" is the order of the day, and under "Plain Vanilla", in preparation the teacher will have written each question on a separate 3x5 card. He/she then asks of the group, "Who would like to take the first question?" The volunteer who takes the question then has the option to either attempt an answer or to call on a classmate for their response. (Respect for persons is a key element in the community so the right to either "pass" or otherwise not participate verbally at any given point is always allowed.) The volunteer with the question is now "in charge" of the question until interest wanes indicating time to move on to the next question. The Community learns fairly quickly how to ascertain when this point is reached.

The use of cards accomplishes a number of things. First, it provides a framework for a lesson plan. In some sessions, one question might open up and consume the entire period. In another session, with another class the first several questions may go by without striking a responsive chord in the Community. In either case, the teacher has a "map" of possible outcomes to the session. The second thing that cards accomplish is that it allows the teacher to further "de-center" him/herself and hand over some of the governance to the students. This occurs because once the discussion has begun, it is crucial that the students as much as possible call on each other.

Step 4 (b)

Initially this is the more difficult of the steps. In this case, no direct manual tie-in was found so the Community must work together to "unpack" the question. Here the ideas of "scratching beneath the surface", and WRAITEC become crucial. These are discussed more fully below.

Step 5

At the end of EACH Philosophy for Children session it is important to evaluate using the General Discussion Criteria (GDC, TM, p.5). This is done relatively quickly, by raising a hand and indicating one's assessment: closed fist, "O", "bad"; open fist, "5", "terrific", or any number in between. Over the course of the year these criteria are discussed and elaborated upon. Later, #4, "Did our discussion 'scratch beneath the surface", will be assessed in terms of WRAITEC.

Step 6

Before returning to Step 1, it is important for the teacher to exercise the option to introduce any logic, reasoning, or "thinking about thinking" exercises or other skills development exercises from the manual that are appropriate, but were not specifically raised by the Community. In addition, before returning to Step 1, the Community

needs to agree that it has dealt with all the questions it was interested in from the initial set generated.

WRAITEC. The idea for "WRAITEC" (TM, p.6) came directly from a presentation by George Ghanatakos at the first Philosophy for Children conference in Texas. It has proven to be a powerful tool. Basically it provides a way of beginning to assess whether or not a discussion has been "philosophical". Negatively put, if a discussion has proceeded and there were no calls for clarification at any point (W), no reasons were offered in support of claims made (R), no assumptions were either revealed or probed (A), no inferences or implications recognized or pursued (I), no questions of truth or claims raised (T), no examples (E) given, nor counterexamples (C) offered, the Community can be fairly confident that nothing of philosophical merit has transpired. Positively put, WRAITEC provides an indication of the kinds of things philosophers do, the kinds of questions they tend to ask, the kinds of things they tend to be on the look out for. There is no presumption given that this is all that philosophers do, but it provides an important grounding for some of the things involved in "doing" philosophy.

In the course of doing the program, given class periods are devoted to the various components represented by WRAITEC. Sessions are devoted to "Reasons", for example, using the many excellent manual exercises on the topic to probe the dimensions that underly reasons and reason-giving. This heightened appreciation and understanding is then woven back into discussions. Teachers are encouraged to put a large chart up in their room with "WRAITEC" written on it and then to refer to this throughout the day whenever an instance emerges of clarification, reason-giving, or whatever. As students become more familiar with these aspects of discussion, "spotters" from the Community are selected to listen to the discussion and record instances they hear of reasons being given, assumptions probed, etc. At the end of the session, along with the GDC, these "spotters" report.

The manual ends (TM, p.7) with several suggested "Methods of Evaluation" that can be used to assess the progress made. Under #2, I've developed a questionnaire that teachers fill out at the end of the year. Under #3, I urge teachers to keep track of the questions asked throughout the year. Without exception they note a change in the quality of the kinds of questions posed. Under #4, teachers who have their students keep "Thinking Logs" note a change in the length and quality of entries.

Given the above "Training Manual" as a reference point, the specific details of a given training session fall into place. If it is to begin as a one day session, I will fairly quickly cover pages 1 and 2, talk briefly about page 3, and then model Steps One and Two using whatever novel is most appropriate. Depending on time, I will then have one of the teachers take the group through these Steps, using a different novel. In the afternoon, depending on the size of the group, I will break the teachers into groups by novel to be used, and have them go through the process once again. Working in groups by novel allows specific problems to be addressed. For example, if a teacher is using Elfie with a kindergarten class and they are not yet able to read, we are already moving away from "Plain Vanilla".

If I have a second day with the teachers, I will then move on to Step 4(a) and practice with them their first discussion, evaluating the session using GDC. If more days are available each Step is simply elaborated in more detail, with emphasis on getting the teachers as involved as much and as soon as possible.

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