FUNCTIONS OF TRAINING IN PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

I. INTRODUCTION

When teachers, students or professors attend a Philosophy for Children training conference, they are expected, amongst other things to "lead" some sessions, (more than none and less than all). The activity of leading sessions is modelled by the workshop director or by coaches, and participants are usually advised as to how to prepare for their session "on". Sometimes participants become confused as to what exactly they are required to do. And sometimes this confusion is general. It seems to me that part of the confusion results from the fact that the sessions at the conferences serve at least four different functions. And sometimes the requirements of the different functions actually conflict with each other.

The four main functions of the sessions in which participants "lead", are, (as I see it): to familiarize conference participants with the content of the Philosophy for Children programs; to provide a model of the community of inquiry methodology; to give participants practice in the art and craft of using the programs; to provide for all the participants an experience of being members of a community of inquiry.

II. FOUR FUNCTIONS

A. Familiarization with Content

Part of the function of the sessions at a Philosophy for Children training conference or workshop is to make the contents of the programs which are being studied, familiar to the participants. Within this function of the sessions here are further objectives being aimed at:

i) To uncover and illuminate the philosophical concepts and themes within the programs for all the participants.
ii) To demonstrate the sequential skills embedded in the programs.
iii) To demonstrate the interconnections between the programs, the common themes, the development of themes etc.

Through practicing with the community of inquiry methodology, reading and inquiring into the PFC novels, it is intended that the philosophical concepts and themes will be uncovered or discovered by the participants themselves. The consequent discussion should illuminate these themes and concepts, and reveal some of the depth and intricacy with which the concepts are laden. Thus participants learn by being immersed in the investigation of the philosophy inherent in the PFC novels.

The sessions which participants lead are also intended to reveal through practice the way in which the cognitive and logical skills are sequenced through out the programs. Thus attention is paid to the manual exercises which reinforce these skills, and to the order in which the skills are presented in the different programs. So, for example, the exercises which appear in Elfie which concentrate on making distinctions, are sequentially prior to those in Pixie which concentrate on relationships, which are themselves sequentially prior to the exercises on syllogistic logic in Harry . . ., which are sequentially prior to the practical syllogistic reasoning in Lisa, Suki and Mark.

Thirdly, the sessions which participants lead are intended to reveal the interconnections of the philosophical themes throughout the seven PFC programs. So, for example, the metaphysical question of the Nature of Reality is introduced in Elfie to reappear in every subsequent program. Unlike the skills which are sequenced in an hierarchial taxonomic manner, the philosophical topics which arise through out the seven programs are at the same level, as it were. In other words discussion of the nature of reality, or the nature of friendship, or the nature of mind is as deep and

"Philosophical" when it arises from the Elfie text with 1st grade children as when it arises from Suki with 10th grade teenagers. The workshop dialogues are intended to familiarize participants with this aspect, by creating a setting in which participants find themselves engaged in similar dialogues on the same philosophical topic arising from the different programs.

B. Modelling the Methodology of Eliciting Philosophical Dialogue

The second major function of the sessions in a training workshop is to model, for all the participants, the methodology used to elicit philosophical dialogue which builds the community of inquiry. This involves the facilitator being able to listen very carefully to what participants are saying, while simultaneously being aware of the philosophical dimensions and questions which underlie the responses of participants so that s/he can ask an appropriate "follow up" question. Listening is crucial, the facilitator must be able to listen while somehow shutting off opinions about the topics which s/he holds about the topics. Otherwise those opinions will interfere with understanding the arguments which the participants put forward, by filtering them through a kind of grid of pre-judgment.

This ability to listen without theory laden-interference is especially important when working with young children, but also important when participants are engaging in a dialogue which is conducted in a language other than their "first" language. It involves great patience, and can also require time, which is not always available to participants in a training workshop. But it is important because theory-laden perception operates in a philosophical dialogue, as it does in other spheres of life.

Elicitation of philosophical dialogue involves being "philosophically and ideologically self-effacing". (The hardest task of all). It does not mean "objective" or "balanced" or "neutral", but rather trying to be self reflective as one facilities, so that runs a constant check on oneself to ensure that one's effort are being directed towards serving the philosophical interests of the community and (at least initially) not oneself. Unlike e.g. a college professor who teaches courses which s/he is interested in and has something to say about. In such a case is it the task of the professor or teacher to illuminate for the students by what ever means- guided discovery, lecture, seminar, slide shows, etc. In Philosophy for Children one is not there to illuminate ideas which one holds to be important for children or teachers, but rather to create the conditions, the community of inquiry, in which the students are more and more able to illuminate for themselves ideas, themes, arguments notions etc. which interest them and their fellow members. In this sense the facilitator does not have an equal role in the community, s/he is there to service the community, and the community's philosophical interests, which may not coincide with his/her own.

C. Practice in the Craft of Facilitating

A third major function of the sessions is to provide practice for participants (teachers or professors) in the craft of using the curriculum materials as they will be doing with teachers or children. This can be distinguished from the art of listening, but needs to accompany it.

Participants each need practice in:

i) the craft of smooth transition into exercises and back to dialogue.
ii) developing the skills in judging when it is appropriate to use manual exercises i.e. when they will develop and not impede the dialogue.
iii) gaining skill in how to ask "follow up questions" which will clarify, focus or help build the dialogue.
iv) identifying the different thinking skills being used by participants, so that
v) they can help participants "sharpen" those skills with exercises or with astute

questions.
vi) identifying the philosophical assumptions, underlying concepts or themes within the dialogue and
vii) focusing and clarifying these with exercises, if appropriate, or with questions, or by writing on the board.

Being able to do all of the above while ensuring the community's ownership of the content of the dialogue.

D. Experiencing The Community of Inquiry for Oneself

One of the most important functions of the training sessions in Philosophy for Children is that the sessions provide for all the participants the experience of being a member of a community of inquiry with all that it entails. There is no substitute or alternative route for this. Participants must experience for themselves, at first hand, what it is that their teachers or children are going to experience, and the depth of that experience is vital for truly understanding how Philosophy for Children works: how it develops thinking skills; how it empowers children and adults who experience it; how the dialogue builds the community; and how the community develops the thinking skills and autonomy of the members of the community; what kind of transformations a member of a community of inquiry experiences and how the fundamental personal growth experienced by many adults and children is connected to the growing desire and ability to think for oneself well,--both skillfully and for "the good".

The latter (a growing desire accompanied by growing ability to think for oneself well- is probably the most fundamentally important effect of Philosophy for Children. To date, Philosophy for Children is probably the only educational program with curriculum which has the ability to develop this within children and adults--what Richard Paul calls critical thinking in the strong sense.(1) Many admirable educational programs do well in developing critical thinking in the weak sense, to use Paul's terminology, but have no greater transfer effects that traditional logic courses, whether formal or informal. Which is to say they do have some, but not very deep transfer effects.

Philosophy for Children empowers people by allowing them to develop the thinking skills with which to seek and deal with the truth--what is there. It helps them by:
i) strengthening their natural curiosity, which is a seeking for truth in order to know more about the world, to find out how things are in the world;
ii) allowing them to think for themselves, to see for themselves what is there;
iii) strengthening the thinking skills which they use in their inquiry about the world, not just in PFC classes but in their whole life;
iv) to recognize what is there, and to deal with it.

The community is not cozy in the sense of hiding the truth about the world and the evil therein, in a nice supportive (and inauthentic) "lets all be nice to each other" sort of sense. Children, especially young children just won't buy that.(2) They know it's inauthentic to pretend to like someone when they simply don't like them, they may play along with the teacher, and even fool the teacher that they all love each other under those conditions, but it won't "carry over" into the school yard, because it is pretend--done to please the teacher. On the contrary, the community of inquiry maintains the natural desire of children to find the truth and simultaneously gives them the skills to handle the truth however unpleasant it may be. It empowers the group and each individual within the group simultaneously. This does not mean it develops rampant individualism. It does not, and the reason it doesn't is that individualism and competition simply do not work in a community of inquiry. The inquiry depends on philosophical dialogue, and the dialogue depends upon a dialectic emerging. Individualism and competition cuts the individual off from a wonderful

experience, denies to the individual the chance of experiencing the intrinsic joy of other minds, other people in dialogue.

The joy which the children experience in dialogue is dependent upon the movement of the dialogue which depends upon authentic participation from the members. Thus being a member of a community of inquiry brings its own intrinsic rewards--the joy of inquiry and empowerment -there is no need to "sugar the pill" with fun things to do to help the boring medicine go down. The true joy of genuine inquiry is far more attractive to people than window dressing entertainment provided by the teacher. There is no need to provide extrinsic motivators, when people (children or adults) experience the genuine article, the real thing--the joy and excitement of a philosophical dialogue within a community of inquiry, the rest pales in comparison, seems shallow and inauthentic compared with the inquiry.

Not because inquiry is cozy and nice, but because it is authentic. The joy of authenticity develops the desire to think for oneself and to see the world as it really is, in all its beauty and all its ugliness. And the experience of this joy leads children then seeks out the tools which will help them to be effective in the world, amongst which are critical thinking skills (in the strong sense), such as identifying assumptions, recognizing fallacies, being careful about jumping to conclusions, seeking out consistencies and inconsistencies in every sphere of life, recognizing part/whole relationships, always being aware of alternatives, etc.

So for example, these thinking skills help children to recognize the logical mistake of racism as well as the moral dubiety of racist views, while simultaneously making them sensitive to occurrences of racism. It helps them to protect themselves from sliding into stereotypical views of other people, and it gives them the tools to counter it when they see it.

Similarly it helps children to protect themselves against manipulation by others, e.g. by the powerful analogies and metaphors, by which the rhetoricians in every sphere of life persuade their audience. Practice in recognizing analogies and metaphors, in questioning them (e.g. is this a good analogy? why? why not? which part of the relationship is being highlighted, in which ways does it not work?) not only develops skills in analogical thinking but simultaneously gives the children powerful tools for thinking for themselves and not being swayed by persuasive rhetoricians--in advertising, politics etc. The children develop the ability and the means to judge for themselves. They are not left hanging on their own, defenseless in a cruel world, (as e.g. portrayed in the film "Dead Poets' Society".) They are empowered, they have the disposition to deal with the truth and they have the skills to deal effectively with reality.

The authentic experience of a community of inquiry created by the participants' own engagement in philosophical dialogue, is unique. It empowers participants, it develops thinking skills, and there is no substitute.

III. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE FOUR FUNCTIONS IN PRACTICE

Occasionally the four different functions of sessions at a Philosophy for Children training conference can come into conflict. So, for example the first and last functions outlined above, familiarization with content and the experience of being in a community of inquiry, apply to all the members of the group in each session. Whereas the second and third functions, the modelling of the methodology of elicitation and the craft of facilitating apply to the person who is leading the session.

Conflict can arise, for example between the need of any individual participant to practice the craft and the need of the group to experience following where the argument leads.

For instance imagine a situation in which a discussion concerning the nature of

truth may be developing, which interests the group, and which has ethical implications, during such a session the "leader" may be required to cover certain cognitive thinking skills, and also needs practice in the gentle introduction of an exercise in, e.g. relationships. In such a situation, the participant is placed in a conflict: should s/he practice facilitation of the dialogue which the group is interested in? Should s/he listen carefully, try to ask follow-up questions which will aid the emerging ethical point, concerning the nature of truth, but which allows the dialogue to go further from thinking skills topic of practicing with relationships (which may be at a much lower level than the level of the current dialogue)? Or is s/he required to intervene in what may have to be a heavy-handed way and impose an exercise so that s/he gains practice in the introduction of exercises, and the group gains knowledge of the contents of the program? One course of action will serve the functions of allowing the learner to gain necessary practice in the craft of PFC and also the function of familiarizing the group with the contents of the program, and another course of action will serve the functions of allowing the learner to practice the art of facilitation and the group to experience the joy of following where the argument leads. But the situation, the lack of time, may dictate that one be at the expense of the other.

Thus both the session leader, especially if s/he is a learner, and the group, may be confused as to what actually should take place in this session.

Moreover, it is hard to see what criteria could be used to evaluate the session (privately or publicly). Because the criteria of evaluation will depend upon which functions the session is supposed to serve. Moreover in an example such as the one given above, the evaluation criteria themselves will be in conflict.

This can be very tough for a learner, who is leading a session, who can find him/her self in a "no win" situation. Either course of action can be criticized using the criteria appropriate for the other.

Even coaches and experienced people find it extremely difficult to serve all four functions in one session. I would suggest that it is possible, but only <u>if</u> there is enough time, and <u>if</u> the session leader is very experienced in actually facilitating PFC sessions.

A further conflict can arise when the session leader is a learner who is beginning to practice the art of elicitation, but is not yet experienced in this very difficult task, and yet <u>as</u> session leader is providing a model for others. In this case the conflict is experienced by the group. Learners in the group <u>do</u> have a need to know whether a session is a model to be followed or not. Yet the individual session leader has a need to learn and practice in a non-intimidating environment.

One answer to this latter dilemma is to make clear that the sessions which are to be regarded as models are those lead by experienced people.(3) Those sessions can be evaluated publicly, but with criteria appropriate to the function the session is to serve. So for example, if a session is designed to show the cognitive and thinking skills sequenced in the program, this may have to be done at the expense of the group's experience of a dialogue which guilds; there simply may not be time for both. In such a case the session should not be evaluated according to criteria appropriate to the art of eliciting dialogue. If a session is <u>intended</u> to model the art of elicitation, then it should be evaluated according to appropriate criteria, and if for example, it happens that the introduction of an exercise would actually impede the dialogue, then the lack of demonstration of the craft of introducing exercises would not be a relevant criticism.

Given that the sessions in a Philosophy for Children training workshop or conference are intended to serve different functions, and that these functions can actually conflict in practice during any one participant's session, there is a need for clarity concerning both which functions are to be served, and what criteria are appropriate for evaluating sessions according to the function they are supposed to

serve. There are several structural models for training conferences which attempt to encompass such distinctions. This paper does not address the different structural models, but I would suggest that any model which clarifies for the learner that there are different purposes to their leading of sessions, and that there may be different criteria involved in evaluation of these purposes, will be effective.

In conclusion, I would suggest that all but one of the purposes of learner-lead sessions described above, can and are achieved in different ways. In an in-service model, where teaches or professors observe a director modelling with children, the learner has access to a model which shows him/her both the art and the craft of facilitation. In such a situation the learner also has time to become familiar with the contents of the programs, both in terms of skill sequencing and philosophical themes, by studying the novels and manuals and the sources--the "Literature" which support them, as well as observing the director's modelling. The learner also has a chance to practice the art and craft under the individual guidance of the director who evaluates and coaches in individual conference and in writing.

The one function which is not served by a combination of study of the program and its sources in the literature coupled with classroom modelling and observation for learners, is the learners' experience of being a member of a community of inquiry. The experience which the learner will be trying to duplicate as a facilitator in PFC with their own students, be they adults such as teachers and professors, or children. There is no substitute for the experience of being a member of a community of inquiry. A learner can "catch up" on almost every other aspect of the PFC programs by other means, but s/he can only experience the community of inquiry by being a member of an authentic community of inquiry in an "in-service" workshop, or a training conference.

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ENDNOTES

1. For a good overview of most of the major serious thinkers in critical thinking see Teaching Thinking Skills: Theory and Practice, Baron and Sternberg eds. Freeman, NY (1987).

2. So, for example, when there is, (as there often is) a class or school bully who rules by fear, the children are able to recognize what rule by fear amounts to, how it operates. When they know what they are dealing with, and because they can recognize that this person is behaving in a nasty way, they are able to deal with it. Rather than being encouraged to be nice to someone who is manipulating them through fear, strength or power of some kind, they are able to render the Bully ineffective by standing together and refusing to do what s/he says. The alternatives, of pretending that everyone is "nice", when the children know that it isn't so, or giving in to the manipulation, both amount to disregarding the truth, failing to see how things really are. Children in a community of inquiry develop the desire to see how things really are, and only when one is able to recognize how things really are can one deal with them.

The Bully is also a member of the community but is reduced to being an equal member and encouraged to be helpful and creative because the latter kind of behavior is the only effective behavior in a true (as opposed to mock or staged) community of inquiry in which the members are equal. Bullying is rendered ineffective by the empowerment of the members of the child who is the Bully (often bigger and stronger

in the case of very young children, or more devious like a blackmailer in the case of older children) may go through a period of great unhappiness when his/her tactics are rendered ineffective. It is one of the many tasks of the facilitator to try to bring the child back as an equal member of the group, so that s/he can also experience the joy of authentic inquiry, and all that follows from it.

3. In training workshops, both intensive "Institutes" over a couple of weeks and in "in-service" models, I would suggest that every learner-lead session be followed by a session lead by the workshop director, (or coaches). I have found this model to work well. The learners know that the model sessions are those which are run by experienced people, and are therefore less intimidated concerning their own sessions, and less confused as to which "model" to follow. This practice obviates the need for public evaluation of learners, they are given private evaluations in consultation with the workshop director. The advantages are two-fold: firstly the learner is more secure; and secondly the evaluation itself is not confusing to the learner. Evaluations made by the group are confusing to the learner because the group is composed of other learners who are not knowledgeable about Philosophy for Children, and therefore not qualified to evaluate sessions in terms of PFC objectives. Moreover evaluation of the Directors' sessions help the learners to internalize the criteria appropriate to the different functions served by these sessions. Which criteria are appropriate to which function needs to be made clear. This also can help to prevent confusion.