Philosophy for Children at the University Level

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In April 1991 the fourth annual Conference of the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children was held at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. One of the main topics at the conference was philosophy for children at the university level. This topic was of special interest for us at Universidad Iberoamericana because we have been working toward the application of philosophy for children at the university for the past six years.

When Dr. Lipman created that program he was concerned with the need to practice thinking skills through philosophical dialogue in the early years of childhood. However, in Mexico as in many other countries, students arrive at the university without having developed the skills required for study of the different disciplines, that is, they do not have the main thinking skills that constitute the basic tools of critical and creative thinking.

So the questions we asked ourselves were: Does a thinking skills program have a place in the University curriculum? and, if so, which program would be best?

Our experience as university professors has led us to give an affirmative answer to the first question. We have observed that our students have great difficulty in formulating problems or questions that they consider relevant. Moreover, sometimes they cannot distinguish a fact from an opinion or give —in a rigorous fashion—the reasons they have reached a conclusion. The problem is that they have been taught content or specific habits, but not the way we know or the general criteria that could help them to think for themselves and to think well—to think critically and creatively.

To answer the second question is not so easy as it is to answer the first. Everyone is willing to agree that students must be helped to find meaning in the world and that thinking skills are necessary to achieve that goal. There are several thinking skills programs that claim to prepare students to think better. If our goal were only to develop student's thinking skills, choosing one program would not be so difficult. But at our university we want to go further. We want students capable of making "good judgments". We want students committed to the needs of society — value oriented and ready to put their capacities and knowledge to the service of others. We concluded that we needed more than a thinking skills program.

In 1980 we heard of the Philosophy for Children program. In the summer of that year we participated in a workshop and immediately we sensed a difference with other thinking skills approaches to education: one in which the richness of human experience was contemplated. In one word, the difference was philosophy. Since I was already in love with philosophy it was easy to fall in love with philosophy for children. As soon as we came home after that summer seminar, we began to work toward the use of a Philosophy for Children pedagogy in our university. It was not an easy task. We had to face skepticism, problems of translation and adaptation of the materials, lack of enough financial support, etc. Through all of this the support of the "international community of Philosophy for Children" has been invaluable and convinced us that our efforts are worthwhile. Needless to say, we had already chosen what we thought was the best alternative to reach our goals, and by now the university is backing our efforts — already convinced through encouraging results with our teachers and our students.

The Philosophy for Children program has had an important role in our quest to find a way to develop critical thinking in university students. Critical thinking, as Lipman puts it, is thinking that is conducive to judgment and is self-correcting, sensitive to context, and reliant upon criteria. If we agree with Lipman's definition of critical thinking, we will have to agree that professionals need it, as well as students. When knowledge and experience are applied to practice we need good judgment. Doctors, lawyers, engineers and administrators are constantly making judgments in the exercise of their professions. The same could be said for teachers, physicists, composers, poets, and psychologists. But, even more, human beings in daily life situations are in need of good

judgment in order to behave wisely. Through our work with university students exposed to the Philosophy for Children program we have found that their reasoning skills are strengthened. Little by little they become capable of expressing clearly their criteria, backing their opinions with arguments, building on what their peers say, and applying to concrete examples the principles, that is, going from the particular case to the universal and back to the particular again.

Critical Thinking and Values

But as I said before, we also wanted in our students the development of moral awareness and a commitment to and with others, that is why we needed more than a thinking skills program. In the community of inquiry centered in the philosophical dialogue we found a valuable way to reach our goals. Philosophical dialogue helps students to get acquainted with a wide variety of points of view, opinions and beliefs that are discussed in the



Laura Pettit, *pencil on paper,* 1991

classroom. The logical component of the philosophical program increases the ability to make sense of one's experiences. At the same time, the moral dimension is placed in the broader context of the student's life and balanced with discussions dealing with other epistemology. In this way the ethical questions are enriched and humanized.

Through the community of inquiry it becomes easier to understand concepts proposed by the texts and/or the participants, and to generate new ideas. The experience of dialogue in the community of inquiry has in itself an ethical dimension: to assume responsibility over our ideas and practices and to commit oneself with our peers in the quest for knowledge.

We need to realize that value education can be dangerous if it is conceived either as indoctrination or as relativism. Both positions should be avoided because they imply a lack of respect for students.

Paulo Freire tell us that the conditions of authentic dialogue are: love, hope, and critical thinking.

Love because it implies the recognition of others as free agents and creators. To listen to the other is to recognize his right to be himself, to give meaning to his experience. Only in this way, I become free myself. To speak to the other is to assume my responsibility over what I say and do, because the authentic word is transforming. To exist as a human being is to express the world and to transform it and such a task is not the privilege of a man or group of men, but the right and duty of all men. It can only be accomplished through love that is the commitment of men with each other and with the world.

Faith makes possible an environment of trust and respect among the participants in the process of dialogue.

Hope is the incessant, brave, and communitarian quest for a better life.

And finally, critical thinking. Freire says that only dialogue is capable of generating critical thinking, and true education cannot be separated from dialogue.

To participate in a community of inquiry through philosophical dialogue allows us to be sensitive towards different points of view and different experiences, and prepares us for creative, responsible and fecund human interaction in the quest for a better way of living in a society.

The body of principles of Universidad Iberoamericana shows a clear commitment to value education. This ideal should permeate all activities of university life. But we need to realize that value education can be dangerous if it is conceived either as indoctrination or as relativism. Both positions should be avoided because they imply a lack of respect for students.

To respect the human dignity of students is to recognize their right to question the proposed values, to accept the challenge of a changing world, to try to search for criteria that can help them to make moral decisions. But our responsibility as educators compels us to provide them with the necessary tools: reasoning skills, inquiry skills, concept formation skills and translation skills. Even that is not enough; it is necessary to help them cultivate positive dispositions and attitudes. Both goals can be reached through the community of inquiry that in itself contains an ethical dimension that expresses fundamental human values such as respect to person, commitment with the community and commitment to truth.

We know that all this does not guarantee good moral conduct. All human beings are free to act even against what they believe or know to be right. Nevertheless, if we foster these skills and dispositions in our students, they will have elements to illuminate their decision making process.

Dialogue: An implementation program

A group of professors and researchers at our university have created a program called "Dialogue." Through this program we expect to spread Philosophy for Children at different educational levels. Our activities include:

1. A permanent seminar in values education.
2. Teacher training workshops for university professors.
3. Teacher training workshops at all levels.
4. Translation and adaptation of novels and manuals.
5. Publication of theoretical and practical articles in university journals.
6. A research project aimed at the creation of a curriculum in environmental ethics at the university level. This year we are testing the first text and exercises and we hope to have results ready in the spring of 1992.

Other related activities

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that we

had the pleasure of being hosts of the fifth Conference of the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children. Just before the Conference, several of our colleagues held a Philosophy for Children three-day workshop with more than 80 participants from different parts of the country. As a result of their work we have had many requests for schools to train their teachers, so our hopes of disseminating the program are growing.

At the same time, many of our professors asked to attend our permanent seminar in values education and are willing to try, under our supervision, to create in their classrooms a community of inquiry using some of the novels or texts related to their different disciplines. Some of them are beginning to create their own exercises.

In the Philosophy Department we designed a Specialization in Teaching Philosophy based on the Philosophy for Children methodology, and during the summer we had our first course called *How to Teach Logic*. For that seminar we also worked toward the adaptation of Philosophy for Children at the university level.

We are also working toward the development of a Ph.D. in Philosophy for Children. This program could be the best way to prepare professors willing to engage in research projects that will help us to fulfill our dream: philosophy as a fundamental part of university education.

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