

The Role of Activities in Teaching Philosophy

SANDY YULE

I propose the idea that there is a singular and central role for a variety of dramatic and image-based activities in a properly designed Philosophy curriculum. Just as it seems intuitively sensible to choose inquiring (working through the posing and investigation of questions in a community of inquiry) as the primary approach to understanding and practicing Philosophy, it seems intuitively obvious that well-chosen creative activities have an essential role in the teaching of creative thinking. While there is creative thinking involved in all thinking, so that traditional philosophical teaching is infused with creative thinking, many aspects of creative thinking are overshadowed if not obliterated by critical thinking where the latter is accorded the dominant role. I assume that we have a responsibility to teach both critical and creative thinking both in general and in an academic study of Philosophy. I ask how creative thinking in Philosophy is to be taught without regular recourse to well-designed creative tasks and activities.

ACTIVITIES AND CREATIVE THINKING

While sitting in a lecture theatre or discussion group can properly be called an activity, I want to introduce and discuss a less conventional subset of learning activities which could be charac-

terized as image-based or creative. I have found these creative activities to be effective in classroom teaching of Philosophy within a tertiary setting, working with trainee teachers who are not interested in becoming professional philosophers. In this context, limited class time has sharpened the choice between teaching for knowledge of a discipline through central texts and teaching to stimulate the creative and critical thinking of the students.

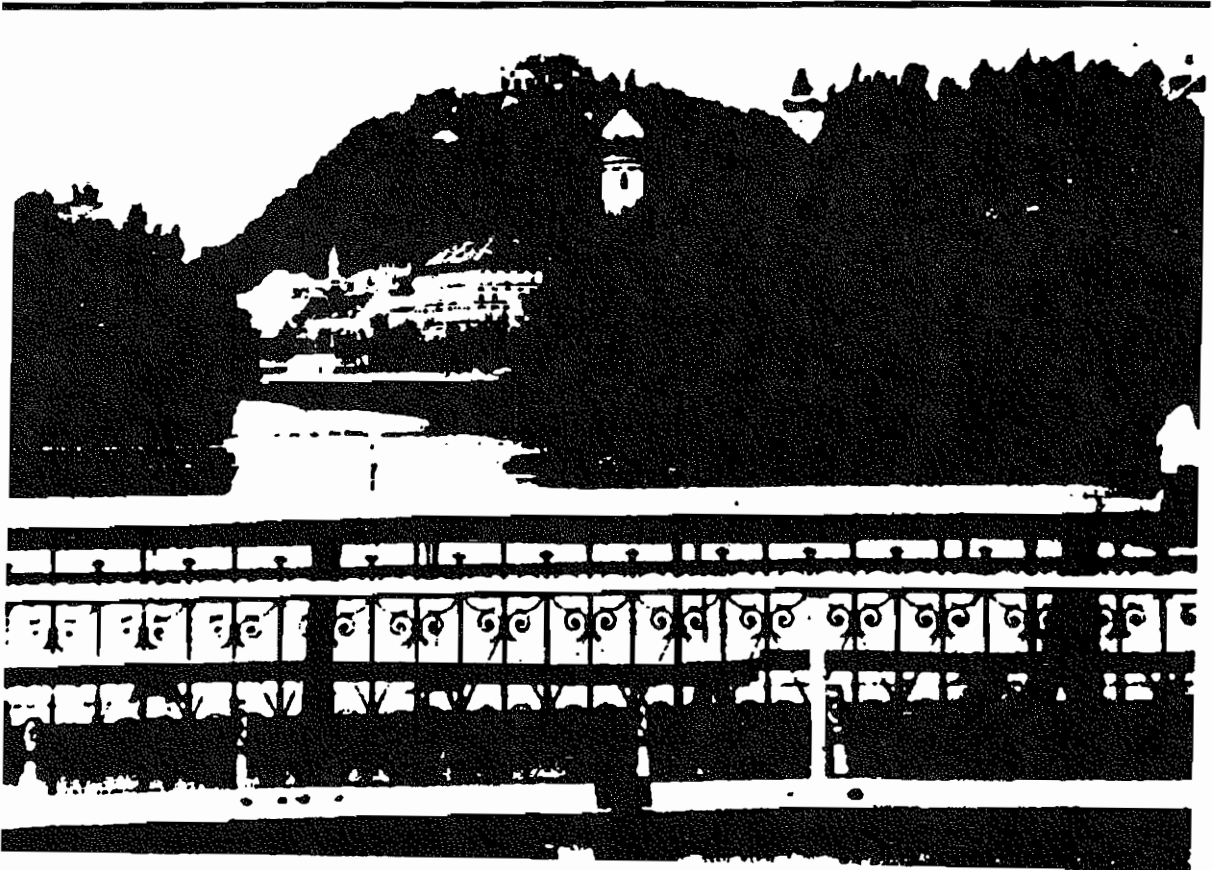
Our first year Philosophy subjects have, since 1979, offered a choice to students between a traditionally oriented and an alternative set of subjects. It was therefore easier for myself and my colleagues working in the alternative stream to experiment with more open-ended and student-centred approaches than if we had felt the need to treat passing on "the tradition" as a major responsibility. We were not, at that time, setting out to teach creative thinking skills, but the student-centred focus led to this emphasis. We set, for assessment, a journal which would require that each student express their own thinking in the subject. This amounts to a creative task as there is no one right way to write a good journal of your own thinking. We produced a long book list of relevant reading without requiring any specific reading. We saw it as our job to stimulate the students' interest in the problematic areas of our topic so that they would want to read for understanding. The journals reveal the degree to which this strategy has been successful in each case which is one factor to take into account in grading. Each journal is different, mak-

ing it much easier to read with attention to the personal voice as well as the intellectual competence of the writer. Three hours of class work each week comprised a two-hour workshop in which the main work of dialogue and stimulation of questioning took place and a lecture to set an agenda and to model the activity of thinking about substantive philosophical questions. It is interesting to note that, with relatively minor alterations, this pattern continues to work for us in 1992. Each year, we keep those sessions and elements that seemed to work well in the previous year unless we can find better possibilities. We are aided in this by substantial feedback from the students, both through what they say in their journals and through explicit evaluative comments on a questionnaire.

Teaching without the focus provided by a text places a substantial burden on us to provide the sense of direction and sharpness of questioning required in academic work. Creative thinking seems to require a kind of "open space" in which all possibilities can be explored and can come to expression. The vast ocean of possibility is both

invigorating and threatening. New life can be won from it, but there is also the risk of losing one's way in the tracklessness of it all. One function of choosing a text on which to focus is to reduce the vastness of possibility to the status of a resource for fresh perspectives and interpretations of the specific, limited text which is the focus. It is easy to hide in even the most threadbare text (let alone the complex, challenging and interesting texts that are normally chosen) so that your own creativity is disciplined and channelled by the text. While there are many good reasons for the traditional approach, I am wishing to report on an alternative approach that has commended itself to me in my teaching. I have found that freshness and authenticity do indeed come from this work in the open space, but that you also need the guidance of general topics formulated as questions and the resources of the philosophical and other intellectual traditions if you are to lead the exploration without 'losing' too many students.

I should also acknowledge that I have not invented, but adapted, all the activities described



below; some of them require a significant apprenticeship to be able to lead effectively.¹ One final caveat is that it is difficult to recreate the freshness and meaning of any learning activity for those who lack the direct experience of it. I shall attempt to indicate the general nature and quality of activities that I continue to find important, with sufficient detail for your own, hopefully sympathetic, imaginative reconstructions.

There are a few general kinds of activities that I have consistently found useful within the context of two-hour seminar/workshop classes; the most useful of these have been drawings, guided imagery, creative writing tasks² and 'people-sculpture.'³ Each of these can be usefully employed within a time-span of between twenty and forty minutes. Simulations, while very powerful and enlivening, take too long to set up and debrief; they also tend to bring in too rich a mixture of social and personal/emotional material for ease of focus on more specifically philosophical questions. Videos are too passive (except as discussion starters) unless the students are involved in making them, which is usually unrealistic in terms of time. Clay modelling and painting,³ while directly useful, require more organization than drawing, so that I tend not to use them in classes on a routine basis. The other kind of activity that I have found helpful for some students has been a weekend philosophy camp in a setting in which the environment can begin to take on a teaching role.⁴ The common shape of these activities is that they require acts of creative imagination by students which can be shared with the group in some form and which then allow for some further questioning and discussion. Provided that the creative task extends and amplifies the philosophical themes of the subject, students have little difficulty in accepting at least the potential usefulness of this approach.

DRAWING

Each year I offer an elective on Peace Education. In the first session, I have come to ask all participants to do a drawing of their idea of peace. I do a drawing myself, which helps to establish a good level of trust as well as a sense of a common inquiry. The drawings are mostly different, though there are common themes such as

peace symbols, shaking hands, holding hands around the globe, doves, harmonious landscapes and the balanced restraint of aggression. There may also be the more negative themes of death, stagnant immobility and boredom. There is usually a sense of recognition of each element contributed and the emerging realization of the complexity of our concept of peace. Were we to attempt this through direct discussion, I believe it significantly less likely that we would reach this perception (which I consider appropriate as a starting point). My experience has been that each of us tends to think that our concept is both unified and sufficient, leading to the need for conflict with a divergent concept. There is another level of importance to these images, which is that what we produce spontaneously tends to represent a conception upon which we are likely to act in some way (a fact of which we may or may not be consciously aware). While there is a personal depth to what is produced, the focus needs to stay with the general issues that arise, which requires sensitive leadership. This activity is particularly good in conjunction with an initial discussion aimed at defining a general concept or area of interest.

GUIDED IMAGERY

Guided imagery, sometimes called guided meditation, provides a less focussed way of tapping divergent parts of our memory and imagination to enrich the dialogue. For effective use of this method, it is essential that people relax and achieve an inward focus of attention so that they can monitor the contents of their own stream of consciousness. The guidance operates from verbal suggestions, firstly for relaxation and then along the lines of a schematic story which people are invited to experience imaginatively. Many kinds of response occur; I invite people to write down, for themselves, what they want to remember before opening up the possibility of sharing something of the experience with the group. There is often a freshness of feeling achieved in these experiences that is associated with vivid imagery. While the connections are always personal, there are also general themes and questions that lead back in many ways to more orthodox discussion agendas. One example is a story line in which people are invited to visit the studio of a sculptor in which they encounter a

statue of themselves. Apart from the personal interest of a fresh encounter with how we see ourselves, there are a range of interesting questions about the nature of personal identity, of self-image and of our relationship with our bodies which are directly raised by this activity. This general kind of activity is particularly useful for making people more sharply aware of areas of personal significance in a general topic and for extending the range of image-based questions from which discussion can develop.

CREATIVE WRITING

Creative writing tasks highlight the symbolic dimension of language and provide a bridge between verbal and image-based ways of working. Tasks such as writing a haiku on death, writing a minimalist novel (50 words) of my life and writing a dialogue between three characters of clearly different views of a topic, are examples from my current teaching. These activities involve significant self-disclosure about how we approach the business of living and understanding our lives. They call for the expression of whole-person responses in which honesty is suggested, although it is perfectly possible for students to choose less candid responses. As the purpose of the exercise is the elaboration of general issues and ways of thinking, the degree of personal authenticity can be treated as a secondary matter. These tasks are particularly useful in bringing together general issues and the conscious personal reflections of students.

'PEOPLE-SCULPTURE'

'People-sculpture' involves the creation of a tableau which represents a general concept or situation. Interest focuses on the specific roles and their relationships within the tableau. While this activity has been powerfully developed for therapeutic purposes, we do not have a therapeutic contract with philosophy students, so that any therapeutic benefit will be of a preventive or incidental nature. These tableaux are created by talking about the general issues until structural elements come into view. These elements are then the basis for the tableau. They usually carry the full charge of appropriate feeling as they are, in

effect, the externalization of the ways we frame our understanding of things. This understanding is the basis for our choices and actions, so that it is less abstracted from our direct personal experiences than more purely intellectual expressions tend to be. It is also expressed through bodily posture and gesture, which associates the present expression with the rich repertoire of everyday living and with our memories of all that we have ever seen. Considerable power and intensity can be generated from a focus on the image of one person, as the coherence of the image, at some level, is assured. An alternative method is to break into small groups and to give each group the task to produce a tableau of the same topic. Finally, you can run the risk of directing an image of your own (risky because our own images bring forward memories and feelings that can sometimes be overwhelming). The method can generate a strong group concentration on reflection on an issue. It allows for more easy communication between our inner perceptions and what is happening outwardly; people are encouraged to combine reflection on the shared, outward presentation and their own responses to it, both from participation in creating it and from observation. It has a dynamic quality, so that it is particularly useful for exploring the relationship between elements of a general concept and in reminding participants of how this concept connects with everyday realities. Of the four activities described, this took me the longest time to gain confidence in leading; it also, arguably, requires the highest level of trust and commitment from the group for satisfactory use.

PHILOSOPHY CAMPS

Philosophy camps are useful for more extended personal reflection with the assistance of the group. I see little point in trying to reproduce classroom seminars in camp setting, as students naturally attend to the environment when on a camp. Nature becomes a teacher when we take our questions and reflections with us on our walks in the bush. The process of a two-day camp that I favour aims to promote this personal reflection with group exposure to each others' questions and reflections. One specific activity that I find useful is the Council of All Beings.⁵ The frame of this activity is that a representative



of Mother Earth calls a Council of All Beings to “assess the state of the local environment” (or some similar focus). Each participant is instructed to wander off into the bush for an hour or so and answer two questions: “For which being am I to speak?” and “What does this being want said?” All then gather and the Council proceeds. Some of the dynamics are fairly predictable and human environmental damage is usually prominent. What seems to me philosophically important in this activity is the imaginative move into a putative form of non-human consciousness, allowing a strong expression of the shadow side of everyday human activities and associated ethical issues. The dialogue usually ensures some objectivity and balance. Other viewpoints are put firmly on the agenda for more serious consideration than is normally available. The process, like all the activities described, makes people very aware of the decisions they make in doing the ac-

tivity, allowing significant reflection on what goes into those decisions. There is also the inherent richness of the beings brought to the Council and the freshness and sharpness of some of the messages, which are rare qualities in more conventional discussions of environmental ethics in which I have participated.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTRIBUTION OF IMAGE-BASED AND DRAMATIC ACTIVITIES

What do these activities contribute specifically to the teaching of Philosophy? Activities offer many advantages in making any subject attractive and accessible to most students. They provide a change of pace and a fresh perspective. They tend to stimulate co-operative group work. They tend to encourage expression from all stu-

dents and not merely the habitual group talkers. They can contribute to the integration of personal forms of knowledge with traditional academic knowledge. They are usually energizing, stimulating further reflection after class. This is the positive picture, assuming that all goes well and that thoughtfulness is the general tone of the activity. More negatively, it should be acknowledged that there are risks of banality, minimized involvement, lack of perception of connections, poor handling of personally sensitive material and damaging interpersonal conflicts. While these are also regrettable possibilities in more conventional academic work, I do emphasize that no teaching approach holds guarantees of universal success. With this caveat, then, it seems clear that activities offer significant general advantages to teaching and therefore to Philosophy teaching. At the least, they should soften the sometimes forbiddingly intellectual image of Philosophy. But the question that interests me is whether they offer something even more specific to the teaching of Philosophy in the area of creative thinking.

The common caricature of the Honours Philosophy graduate of my generation was contained in the sentence, "Give me an argument and I'll tell you what's wrong with it". I believe that this caricature did contain a grain of truth in pointing out the pre-eminence of critical thinking in the Philosophy curriculum. It is of course a creative act to mount a good critique. It is also a creative act to come to an understanding of what an author is saying. Nevertheless, the sharpening of analytical tools can proceed without the balance provided by the practice of synthesis. Critical thinking works from a structure that requires the dominant presence of the inner judge. It is a common experience that this inner judge acts to suppress and crowd out most flights of fancy and other creative imaginative processes. Unless space is made for creative work, our imagination has to operate within the limitations of our present common sense. The preponderant use of texts that already display a high degree of synthesis prompts the student to a critical analysis of weaknesses and contradictions rather than to the daunting task of creating a genuinely alternative synthesis.

It is a common feature of the image-based and dramatic activities that I have described that they present the student with a disorganized plethora of perspectives and questions which re-

quire synthesis as much as analysis. They provide practice in identifying the specific nature and quality of an experience. They also provide practice in thoughtful reflection and in the construction of significant questions and statements. As an adjunct to more conventional forms of creative intellectual work, they provide an enriched basis for synthetic speculation and the attendant work of criticism. It seems to me that we need an analysis of the main elements of creative thinking in a form from which curriculum organization can naturally flow. Matthew Lipman's elegant comparison between critical and creative thinking offers an example of such an analysis.

<i>Critical thinking</i>	<i>Creative thinking</i>
<i>Megacriterion: Truth</i> <i>(a kind of meaning)</i>	<i>Megacriterion: Meaning</i>
<i>Aims at judgement</i>	<i>Aims at judgement</i>
<i>Governed by singular criteria</i>	<i>Sensitive to contrasting criteria</i>
<i>Self-correcting</i>	<i>Self-transcending</i>
<i>Sensitive to context</i>	<i>Governed by context⁶</i>

Learning activities such as I have described above are able to offer a variety of ways of enriching the classroom context, making it more likely that this context will become influential in the thinking of students. By providing a present experience of some kind, the need to create a common reference for thought and discussion through making up detailed (and sometimes highly artificial) examples is obviated to some extent. This approach establishes a governing role for the classroom context. By working with images which communicate symbolically, contrasting perspectives with their differing criteria can more easily be considered together. It is this holding together of potentially exclusive or even contradictory perspectives which prompts sensitivity to multiple criteria. Images can somehow encapsulate and express whole perspectives and forms of life. It is this which prompts self-transcending responses from all involved in the dialogue, as our initial perspective may come to seem partial and limited to us alongside other perspectives. Where critical thinking might reveal reasons to withdraw our assent from a perspective, it is creative thinking which might reveal a new and more viable perspective to which we can move. One-sidedly critical thinking can lead us to an intellectual homelessness in which

no perspective is adequate for our habitation because we are unable to withstand the shadow of nihilistic relativism. Philosophy teaching which regularly employs learning activities based on creative expression will provide unobtrusive resources for the construction of intellectual dwellings, however temporary.

Philosophy has had a hard time establishing itself in the school curriculum; one reason has been that it requires perseverance with thoughtful concentration upon stubborn questions for its existence. So long as the model of Philosophy teaching was the one-hour lecture and the tutorial to aid assimilation of the lecture and the written text, it was judged to be too demanding for all but the highest levels of schooling. Fundamental to the success of the Philosophy for Children program has been the creation of a more appropriate model of Philosophy teaching, at least for primary and secondary schools; I would suggest that this model is viable as an alternative at any level of education. One central aspect of its success as a pedagogical model is that it challenges the creative energies of students, leading to positive motivation and participation.

THOUGHTFUL CONCENTRATION AS A FEATURE OF SUCCESSFUL PHILOSOPHY TEACHING

When I began to teach, in Philosophy and in other areas, I remember adopting the notion of dialogue as my guide. This flowed from my reflection that my own most significant and transformative learning had been from dialogue, formal and informal. While this sometimes led me, as a teacher, into intense conversation with one class member to the probable neglect of the rest, it also led me to the perception that I was coming to be able to tell when the conversation was effective as Philosophy teaching and when it was not. There was a component of monitoring the philosophical quality of what was being said; but at least as important was an awareness of the feeling tone in the group. Good philosophical dialogue produced thoughtful concentration where poor philosophical dialogue produced something else. I had become aware of the quality of the listening of the group, both to what was being said and to the thoughts that were not being said. I have come to use this as the single most important area of perception to consult in making the

judgement about when to 'move on' and when to stay with what we are doing. My own judgement of the philosophical value or otherwise of the dialogue is probably the other main perception on which I rely.

Work in Philosophy does require thoughtful concentration, whatever else is involved. Students can of course be thoughtfully concentrated on many things other than philosophical issues. In practice, I look for this thoughtful concentration after a good philosophical question has been asked. It is at this point that I believe the work of thinking is perceptibly going on even if I have no clear idea of its content. I am able to check this to some extent by what is said next in the group; it is on this basis that I have come to trust the validity of my perception that this thoughtful concentration is occurring. The achievement of this thoughtful concentration has become one of my central aims in classroom philosophy teaching. Good statements, clearly formulated questions, energetic argument, widespread participation, even the forms of dialogue appropriate to a community of inquiry, are all important; but they relate to the external products and processes of the thinking of the group. In addition to all these elements is this experience of what I am calling thoughtful concentration, which typically occurs after a good question has been asked. It is different from polite or acquiescent listening. It seems to be created from the combination of the inherent interest of what is happening in the group process and the attentive, thinking and listening energy of the people involved.

I have found that this thoughtful attention is regularly attained through the use of the activities that I have described, and that articulation of the fruits of this thinking is common. The particular quality of this thinking is usually more immediate, personally focussed and connected with feelings and memories than for more abstract philosophical discussion, even where the same issues are involved. I am concerned for the personal appropriation of philosophical thinking by the students; these less verbal methods are particularly well suited to support this need for most students. One exception would be students wedded to a more traditional approach to Philosophy. A colleague once told me that he would be insulted if I asked him to draw a picture of a miracle as a class exercise, which captures something of the response that I have had from a small number of students. It is necessary to look for

verbalization as well as interrogation of the meaning of these experiences; my point is that there must be something at the experiential level that is worth verbalizing if the dialogue is to have any energy. I have found creative activities to offer reliable ways to generate real, if symbolic, experience that is usually found to have something of value to contribute to the philosophical reflections of students.

I am aware that my account of the activities and my advocacy of an enhanced role for creative thinking is less than conclusive in this general form. I offer this account as a reflection on my teaching experience which points in some directions that do not seem particularly well explored as yet and I look forward with interest to some dialogue about these issues.

NOTES:

1. Here I would like to acknowledge what I have learned from Doug Pernell in this area, particularly the use of drawings, paintings and 'people-sculpture.' This last is a method drawn from psychodrama (Moreno) and developed for therapeutic purposes by Virginia Satir. It involves the use of people to make a tableau built from specific roles and elements. It is possible to illuminate relationships between these elements by asking for reports from those involved.

I would also like to acknowledge what I have

learned from team-teaching with Deva Daricha (formerly known as Robin Barke Hall), particularly in the area of guided meditation and working with enhanced body awareness.

There are many other people from whom I have learned important elements of this work.

2. Jamie Bradbeer has brought me some useful activities in the area through our shared teaching.
3. Here I would like to acknowledge what I have learned from Fran Withers, Sarah Eeles and the Guild for Psychological Studies, both with these activities and from the live-in experience of workshops at Four Springs, California, which as influenced my organization of Philosophy camps.
4. Other influences to acknowledge here are Jill and David Bathdate, Joanna Macey and Cahira Qalbi, through the work of the Climbing River Foundation.
5. This activity was devised by John Seed, of the Rainforest Action Network. I learned it from a student who had worked with John. I recently did this activity under John's leadership and was pleased to note that, apart from the use of masks made by each of us to represent our characters, there were few differences from what I was doing under the name.
6. M. Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge University Press, p. 193.

Sandy Yule, Ph.D., is Chair of the Philosophy in Education Unit, Department of Social and Educational Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia.

