

Thinking Well? According to Whom?

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An undergraduate student's paper (Freeman, 1992), written for a course I conduct called 'Improving Thinking Skills', caused me to think again about some notions of thinking, reasoning and inquiry in relation to programs being introduced into schools. The subject included an examination of critical thinking, approaches to values and ethics in education, and theories associated with introducing philosophy into schools.

As part of an exploration of available resources designed to introduce the content of philosophy and the skills of inquiry into schools, and theorists in the area, Lipman's (1980) theory was examined. His answer to the question "What does 'to think well' mean?" was, in part, a definition of philosophy as "the finest instrument yet devised for the perfection of the thinking process" (1980, p.xi). Reflecting on these claims in connection with the education of Australian Aborigines, Freeman wrote:

"Philosophy does not represent the perfection of the thinking process, it represents a particular thinking process dealing with a particular body of concepts, described in 'Philosophy for Children' as "the things that matter".

Any decision about criteria for "the things that matter" is nothing more than a culturally based value judgement suggested Freeman. He stressed the need to remember, for instance, that remote Aboriginal communities may still function on the basis of a closed system of beliefs in which all answers to philosophical questions are already contained in the dreaming stories and traditions of the tribe. These established truths are characterised by "religious rather than scientific attitudes in the sense that what they believe is more important than what they can prove".

Lipman, while acknowledging that members of a philosophical 'community of inquiry' cannot be distanced from their values, seems to view the process of philosophical inquiry as somehow objective. Is it, or does it merely adhere to a particular set of values? Is the process of "helping children learn how to think for themselves", outlined as the main purpose of the program (1980, p. 53) value-free, or does it reinforce the dominant philosophy which treats the universe as an objective phenomenon in which individuals can construct their own meaning, values and knowledge on the basis of cognitive reasoning? Freeman's paper reminded me of the need to remember that terms like 'self-expression', 'self-discovery' and 'selfconfidence' are culturally specific.

While thinking is natural, what constitutes "thinking well" is linguistically and culturally conditioned. Therefore, the efficiency of, and subsequent value given to particular thinking skills, is only relevant within the bounds of a particular culture. For example, Aboriginal children arrive at school with an impressive repertoire of thinking skills which are efficient and effective within their own cultural framework, but are perhaps of little use, and are certainly not valued in many classrooms. (Christie, 1985, p. 56).

Christie reminds us that Western societies and thought tend to make what is representative of the predominant culture appear 'natural'. This has occurred to the point where society is largely unaware of the level of cultural maintenance and reproduction entrusted to schools (1985, p. 52). Traditional Aboriginal belief systems are fundamentally antithetical to dominant Western cultural values, and consequently the thinking skills valued and used by traditional Aboriginal people are completely different from other Aboriginal groups and certainly those of their western counterparts .

Lipman justifies his program on the basis that engaging children philosophically is natural. That is, philosophical thought begins with natural curiosity and an instinctive appetite for meaning (1980, p. 13) and a philosophy program in schools merely provides a framework for "thinking about thinking", a task to which children are already predisposed. One could argue that teaching children the skills of philosophy has very little

to do with naturalness and very much to do with enculturation. That is, it provides children with a culturally sanctioned environment in which to participate in a culturally approved task.

There is a belief that learning begins with a sense of wonder and questioning (Lipman, 1980, p. 31) and it is this innate quality in children, which when nurtured and encouraged, is the most effective means of developing thinking skills centred on philosophical inquiry (p.16). Much of the remote Aboriginal students' learning has been informal, without the need for much verbalisation. They may be unused to demands for compliance and the answering of questions.

By examining cultural attitudes to knowledge, the impact of closed and open belief systems becomes apparent. While much of Western society values knowledge in terms of its problem-solving potential and the intelligence necessary to understand it, it is common for Aboriginal culture to value knowledge in terms of its exclusiveness. That is, while Western access to philosophical knowledge might only be limited by intelligence and a willingness to work, Aboriginal access to philosophical, or sacred, knowledge can be closely related to tribal status and initiation. While we might measure truth in terms of its logical consistency or "reasonableness", for traditional Aboriginal people truth might be accepted only if the knowledge is conveyed by the appropriate authority figure.

The statement that children's learning begins with a sense of wonder and questioning is only valid as a cultural construction of Western children's foundation thinking skills. While Aboriginal children are curious, their curiosity is expressed entirely differently from that of Western children, being perceptual rather than epistemological (Harris, 1980, p. 59). What they are curious about reflects their particular functional learning system. Being conditioned to pragmatism and the present, the curiosity of Aboriginal children, particularly from remote communities, is expressed in terms of highly sensitive visual perception of the natural and social environment (Harris, p. 62). Learning by observation and initiation makes abstract questioning relatively meaningless. In a culture where beliefs are concrete as opposed to theoretical, Aboriginal children have little need for, or interest in, asking 'why' questions. In fact, due to the secret nature of Aboriginal folk tales, curiosity is often deliberately discouraged as there are spiritual and punitive consequences for the too inquisitive. There is much teaching or transmission of the law through story.

To treat philosophical inquiry as natural and objective rather than culturally subjective unavoidably involves treating other cultures as unnatural and subjective. It reinforces the dominant culture at the expense of other cultures. The dilemma is that remote Aboriginal communities and other cultural minorities recognise the need for their children to succeed in the Australian education system. This is because a 'good' education is the key to power. However, success at school can involve an enculturation resulting in the destruction of their cultural heritage.

The value of a philosophical inquiry is that it can help Aboriginal children understand the modes of thought which underpin Western language and culture. If taught explicitly, Western thought can be recognised as an alternative way of seeing reality (Harris, 1990, p. 21).

Many Aboriginal children are conditioned to accepting mysteries and natural phenomena without questioning, and therefore an appetite for understanding is often an insufficient motive for interest. Recognising and avoiding potential disagreements is a much stronger social value in Aboriginal culture than a desire to know. Therefore, the encouragement to agree or disagree with others' points of view, a common method of inquiry, may be confronting for them. Behaviourally, many students will say what they think the teacher wants to hear, and if they are unsure they will circumlocute discussions, avoiding direct responses to the point of not saying anything at all (Christie, 1985, Ch 4).

The premise that children will exhibit curiosity and initiate questions is quite clearly culturally inappropriate for Aboriginal children who are taught to respect the wisdom of the elders and are initiated into adulthood as receptors. In terms of discussion, the place of opinion is largely irrelevant. Sacred knowledge about philosophical issues is concrete rather than theoretical. Further, being conditioned to resolving philosophical issues on the basis of givens means rational inconsistency is of little consequence to Aboriginal children who are comfortable accepting contradictory sets of facts. Aboriginal children are capable of learning Western modes of thought, but they need to be clearly and sensitively taught.

The challenge, then, is to ensure something quite new can develop as a result of philosophical inquiry. Because of the cultural diversity of their classrooms, many teachers are developing culturally sensitive learning

environments and appropriate teaching strategies. The community of inquiry developed in philosophy in schools programs, is one approach. Here, if operating successfully, there should be a shift from a teacher dominated choice of discussion topics to an environment where the students are encouraged to take responsibility for both content and discussion. Clive Lindop (1993) wrote about his experiences in the Northern Territory working with Lipman's program with remote Aboriginal communities. He believed the community of inquiry approach, when it replaces the teacher-solicitation of pupil responses with open mindedness, wonderment, interest and respect for all views:

"... would ease, and possibly remove, any feeling of coercion on individuals to reply or participate. As this is not unlike the multi-age peer group interaction familiar to Aboriginal children, they may well feel more inclined to respond."(p. 7)

Lindop described the problems and advances made whilst working with a story containing the language devices of analogy, simile and metaphor, devices which he admits " ... may be puzzling enough for Standard Australian English (SAE) speakers, let alone for those whose first language is not English." His reminder that for Aboriginal children SAE may be their third language. They are already users of Aboriginal English and their traditional Aboriginal language.

Errington (1992), Freeman noted, reminds us that teachers still have to make decisions about the direction student development ought to take. This may occur within an ideological framework which is not necessarily subjected to any kind of scrutiny.

A promising development in arts education, and a model for other curriculum areas to implement, is the growing realisation that the arts cannot be understood apart from the cultural context in which they are produced. Eliot Eisner has highlighted the social and cultural functions of the arts. He argues that for an aesthetic experience to have educational significance, it should be able to provide students with the cultural resources which they can then use to address the problems of the world.

just as culture shapes art, art shapes culture. Our convictions, our technology, and our imagination shape our images, and our images, in turn, shape our perception of the world. One major aim of Discipline Based Art Education is to help students understand these relationships by examining the interaction between art and culture over time. (Eisner, 1987, p. 20)

These insights have implications for rethinking education in a multicultural society. Schools are already attempting to respond to the diversity in a variety of ways. They are attempting to promote the benefits of a harmonious multicultural society in which all cultural traditions can be maintained. But the critical analyses put forward by Bhabba (1990) and Hall (1991) remind us that this approach can obscure the issues of power and privilege. There is the inherent danger here of dealing with differences by making them marginal or by being tokenistic. Bhabba and Hall stress the need to attend to the issues of what is described as the 'speaking position'. In the case of schooling, this includes looking at the positions from which teachers might conceptualise and engage with differences in their classrooms.

As Rizvi reminds us:

Teaching remains a predominantly Anglo-Australian profession (approx. 8.5 being from non-English speaking backgrounds), and schools have been shown to embody a contradictory set of values to those that the rhetoric espouses-democracy, creativity and co-operation - more likely to be obedience, compliance, conformity and homogeneity. (Gunew & Rizvi, 1994, p.63)

If these conditions are to be challenged, teachers must provide a social space within which to resist a monocultural curriculum. Philosophical inquiry, with its community of inquiry approach, is the very antithesis of Rizvi's claim that:

Schools seek to legitimate the dominant social ideologies by fostering among students a form of compliant thinking which often prevents the formation of a critical understanding of social biases. (Gunew & Rizvi, 1994, p. 64)

It presents a methodology which enables teachers to work with emergent ethnicities within a context of a global culture. It provides a space for understanding social relations, and imagining possible futures. Teachers can promote an understanding of cultural traditions by using their classroom 'communities' with their skills of imagination and reasoning to address issues associated with marginalisation of minority groups and foster new understandings.

NOTES:

1. Features: valuing student's ideas, a readiness to participate in a discussion, respect for one another's opinions, and enquiring into issues of student interest chosen from resources that are issue rich.
2. I have been examining transcripts of a wide range of classroom discussions in metropolitan Melbourne which feature this behaviour pattern.

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