

Thinking About Asia:

The Study of Asian Cultures Using A Philosophical Inquiry Approach

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The extent to which the 'community of inquiry' approach would assist the critical analysis of topics such as diversity, plurality and the essential humanity of people was the major focus of the project described in this paper. It was believed that this method could provide strategies for teachers to investigate, discuss and understand aspects of Asian life and identify and challenge stereotypical views of people from Asian cultures.

Twenty-five teachers from a range of Melbourne primary and secondary schools attended a workshop that used resource materials gathered from the popular and folk literature of Asian cultures as a stimulus for philosophical inquiry into Asian culture. The extent to which the activities designed around this literature fostered philosophical and social inquiry and stimulated critical examination of Asian cultures was discussed with the teachers in follow-up interviews. This paper reports on the content and process of the workshop as a model for introducing teachers to the concept of philosophical inquiry and their responses to the impact of this introduction in addressing issues of the study of Asia in their classrooms. The community of inquiry methodology has strong implementation possibilities in the integrated curriculum, specifically within the social education and language programs in primary classrooms in Victoria.

BACKGROUND

Within the context of developing philosophical inquiry in the classroom and the teaching of thinking skills, the researchers have, over ten years, encouraged the implementation of philosophical inquiry through a community of inquiry methodology.

The community of inquiry approach involves a group of individuals inquiring into issues and ideas together as a community. The notions of respect, questioning and communicating are firmly embedded in the community of inquiry experience. Critique of ideas and opinion is central in this discussion model. It is a disciplined approach which stimulates inquiry in a safe environment, fostering the development of knowledge and encouraging informed action (Lipman 1988; Fisher 1990; Fernandez-Balboa 1993).

As the community of inquiry approach was not discipline specific, the writers considered it could be applied to Asian Studies as a vehicle to support current emphasis on inquiry learning, co-operative group work and the development of the individual in a democratic and pluralistic society. The approach required teachers to develop skills to handle rigorous discussions and had proved significant in strengthening discussion and examination of philosophical and social issues. It had also been found effective in changing teachers' attitudes and understandings about their students' abilities to reason, speculate, think critically and logically (Perrott 1988, Wilks & Cherednichenko 1995, 1993).

Research in 1993 (Cherednichenko & Wilks) identified concerns over how teachers' attitudes to their Asian students affected their beliefs about their thinking abilities. The researchers believed that, by using the community of inquiry approach with a set of resources which drew on stories developed around Asian cultures and folk tales, issues arising from the literature would be effectively addressed. Another desired outcome was an increasing awareness by teachers of both the background and abilities of Asian students in their classrooms.

TEACHER PREPARATION

A two hour workshop was conducted by the authors. In attendance were 29 practising teachers and education administrators who encompassed a diverse range of expertise, interests and employment

Employment	Private School	Public School	TOTAL
Primary Teachers	4	10	14
Secondary Teachers	5	7	12
Education administrators	1	2	3
TOTAL	10	19	29

(see Table 1 below). Participants self-selected the workshop and expressed an interest in learning about new strategies for investigating the study of Asia in their practice.

The workshop aimed to introduce the participants to the teaching strategies involved in the community of inquiry approach. The role of the teacher in the community of inquiry was discussed using the following outline based on Sand (1993).

Stimulus materials were introduced to the teachers which, when discussed using the community of inquiry approach, stimulated inquiry into aspects of the specific Asian culture being studied. The participants, as members of a community of inquiry, read a Buddhist sermon and discussed their understanding of the meaning of the piece. As well, several Asian folk tales were read and the teachers were asked

to identify questions and issues which the reading raised for them. The issues were varied and complex ranging from literal inquiry to questions which issues which reflected on the concept of culture and ethical issues, e.g.

- What is the difference between culture and environment?
- Can we ever understand how people in other cultures think?
- What does it mean to treat someone as a person?
- Are there behaviours or human reactions which are universal?
- Why do some individual appear to have power over others?
- Is it integral to Chinese/Australian culture to be part of a community?

Constructing learning experiences for the study of, and inquiry into, Asia and Asian cultures was explored using the three focus questions:

1. What?

What is the experience, event, etc?

Designing experiences and events in the students' educational program which engaged them with Asian cultures. Programs may be activity-based and there were numerous resources - books, stories, films, art activities, music etc, which provided the students with vicarious experiences of a range of Asian cultures and customs.

TABLE 2: Santi's Categories of teachers' role during philosophical Inquiry

Facilitator	Help the circulation and comprehension of ideas. Help students see themselves as problem seekers and problem solvers
Provoker	Stimulate students to explore and deepen their own positions. Through opposition to given statements offer new cues for discussion.
Modulator	Foster the cohesion of the discourse and lead the reasoning process towards the most productive direction.
Monitor	Control the correctness of reasoning and underline possible fallacies in arguments. Encourage listening to others.
Supporter	Support the cognitive operations involved in the thinking process.

So what?

What do I think about this? What questions does this experience raise?

TABLE 3: Teacher evaluation of workshop presentation

Criteria	Agree Strongly	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
The objectives of the workshop were made clear and understandable	16	13		
The preparation of the material was consistent with the objectives and well planned	17	11	1	
The presentation of material was logical and comprehensible	14	15		
The workshop presentation was suitable to the backgrounds, knowledge and needs of attendees.	11	12	5	1

Encouraging the students to not just experience the event but to enquire critically about the meaning of the experience; to investigate assumptions which were brought to an experience of another culture and to make connections between the experiences of the student's own culture and that of the Asian culture being studied.

Now what?

How has my thinking/ action changed?

The students and teachers critically and creatively reflected on the experience, responding to questions which challenged cultural understandings and practices and developed new principles for future action.

The writers believed current programs and materials developed for the study of Asia provided adequate responses only to the first level of question i.e. knowledge about the music or food (etc.) of Asian nations. Any associated discussion was generally at a superficial level with students responding to teacher questions. They believed the community of inquiry approach was required for levels two and three in order to foster the development of *philosophical discussion* where the inquiry would be student centred, and where the students with the teacher as facilitator, would reflect on deeper thinking and understandings.

WORKSHOP EVALUATION

The immediate reactions of the teachers as to the usefulness and transferability of the concepts and materials presented and experienced in the seminar was gauged from a written and anonymous response sheet. Evaluation of the workshop was undertaken in two parts:

- Evaluation of the workshop presentation
- Evaluation of the participants' reactions as to the suitability of the Community of Inquiry approach to teaching as a suitable method for conducting studies about Asia in schools.

At the conclusion of the workshop attendees were invited to present their reactions to the workshop by responding to the following three questions:

- Do you think the community of inquiry methodology provides a suitable approach for encouraging students to think about Asia?
- How does this approach differ from other classroom strategies?
- Describe how the community of inquiry approach might change students' attitudes and understandings of Asian and other cultures?

TABLE 4: Teacher's post-workshop responses

Cat 1	Cat 2	Cat 3	Cat 4	Initial Reaction (from Appendix B)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Reject
	*			requires students to analyse and justify ideas	8	2		
		*		enables difficult areas to be dealt with	5	5		
*				enables deeper understanding of Asian culture	7	2	1	
*				does not require extensive prior knowledge of Asia	4	5	1	
	*			encourages freedom to take risks & investigate ideas	7	3		
	*			challenges first thoughts and impressions	8	2		
		*		removes stereotypical exotic element of Asian culture	4	4	2	
			*	does not expect 'right' answers	6	4		
*				allows students to develop own thoughts freely	6	4		
*				allows students to express philosophical ideas	5	5		
			*	moves teacher out of 'centre stage'	5	5		
		*		more challenging to students	7	3		
			*	values childrens' responses, ideas and beliefs	6	4		
*				provides opportunity for oral language development	7	3		
*				better understanding of the differences between cultures	4	5		1
	*		*	allows students to express prejudices in more collaborative environment	4	6		
	*			encourages students to think at a deeper level	6	3	1	
*		*	*	gives students opportunities to form opinions	6	4		
	*		*	allows time to work through misconceptions	5	5		
		*		provides students opportunity to realise their own prejudices	7	3		
		*	*	directs attention from the differences to similarities in Asian and Australian cultures	5	4	1	

Most of the participants in the seminar felt that the community of inquiry approach was suitable for inquiring about Asia, because it went beyond the vicarious experience of the culture (i.e. only reading the stories, making the mask, listening to the music) and invited the students to ask questions of their experiences, to challenge their own assumptions and understanding and enable them to make connections between the practices of their own culture and that of people from another culture. Teachers from junior primary to senior secondary Asian history felt that the approach would be helpful.

The teachers identified the approach as significantly different from the teaching strategies already used in their classrooms for inquiry-based subjects. They discussed the shift from teacher-centred inquiry to student-centred inquiry where the students actually identified, negotiated and constructed the framework for the inquiry and discussion. They believed the philosophical issues raised and the deeper level of discussion would help to reduce stereotypical beliefs and that there was potential for the development of greater understanding about the practices of people from different cultures.

After three months, the teachers were interviewed in an effort to gauge the longer term understandings of community of inquiry approach to studying Asian cultures. The responses selected were in four categories (three are students related: one is teacher-related) and concerned:

Category 1:

Students' knowledge/understanding of Asian culture;

Category 2:

Students' thinking skills;

Category 3:

Students' attitudes to Asian culture; and

Category 4:

The role of the teacher in the classroom.

The survey was administered to 10 attendees chosen at random. The results of the survey are illustrated in Table 4 opposite.

The results of the post-workshop survey indicate:

- a high degree of consistency in the responses to the selected initial reactions;
- a high degree of support for the appropriateness and/or relevance of the Community of Inquiry approach to teaching Asian studies in schools; and
- the potential benefits of more detailed research into the connections between and applications of the Community of Inquiry methodology to the teaching of Asian Studies in schools.

CONCLUSION

This research indicated that training teachers in the community of inquiry methodology as a way of enhancing studies of Asia, had, in most cases, caused teachers to attempt the approach with perceived improvement in both lesson structure and learning outcomes. The writers believed the extent of these improvements required further detailed investigation to measure the accuracy of the teachers' stated perceptions and observe elements of the community of inquiry in class programs. This was necessary to validate the teachers' perceptions of change. It was also important to recognise that the training workshop, although only brief, had been perceived as affecting change in teacher pedagogy. The writers believed further research was required over longer periods of time in order to establish the impact of the community of inquiry in the study of Asian cultures.

Developing understanding of Asian cultures is a complex educational task. In affecting deeper understandings about other cultures, teachers attempt to encourage students to participate in experiences which heighten awareness of the customs and beliefs of the culture. These experiences can be enriched when rigorous inquiry enables the students to identify issues related to studies of culture and society and which enable them to challenge their current beliefs and understandings. Philosophical inquiry in the classroom, especially when developed through the community of inquiry pedagogy, provides a learning environment which values and fosters student inquiry and the deep exploration of social beliefs, customs and relationships. When the inquiry is stimulated by direct experiences of the culture, the event provides at least a vicarious connect with the culture studied. Folk, traditional and religious stories, the teaching tools within the culture, often present the essential values upon which the culture has developed.

The development of thinking skills, when coupled with studies of Asia provided an effective developmental strategy for teachers. Student and teacher thinking and reasoning skills were encouraged, inquiry about the context presented encouraged greater understanding and tolerance, most noticeable in the study of cultures which differed markedly from our own.

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