



THE **WEB W**ANDERER

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This is the second in our series of reviews of websites that promote philosophical inquiry. The sites reviewed in this column have one thing in common - they are designed to encourage and promote the activity of philosophy amongst students of all ages. While principally designed for use in schools, many of these sites provide wonderful resources that can also be used to initiate philosophical inquiry between parents and children or between groups of friends.

Spending Your Money wise-ly

Newswise

<http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk/newswise>

<http://sapere.net/>

Newswise was created by Steve Williams and Roger Sutcliffe. Twelve editions have been published on the web since 1998 and these can still be accessed through their site. Having followed the development of Newswise over this time, I am unashamedly a fan. Beginning in January 2000 Newswise will be produced by Dialogueworks and will be made available though subscription. Whether for use in school, or between parents, children and friends, it would be hard to find a better way to spend your educational pound (or dollar, or ruble, or shekel, or...)

Many teachers see a natural affinity between Philosophy for Children and the goals of their language and literacy programs. They quickly come to appreciate the link between the kind of discussion carried out within a community of inquiry and oral language development (discussion that is, for example, attentive to word choice, mindful of ambiguity, aims to clarify concepts and requires from students active listening).

The use of written texts to trigger classroom discussion (including story-as-text) adds a further literacy dimension by encouraging students to actively question and challenge what they read. In Phi-

osophy for Children, the act of reading encourages students to be attentive to layers of meaning, to look for assumptions, reflect on consequences, play with the limits of imaginative possibility, and to identify underlying issues they find puzzling or interesting.

This kind of reading encourages what Martha Nussbaum identifies as ‘critical (or judicial) spectatorship’. It is a kind of reading in which understanding the story (or text) requires us not only to immerse ourselves in the story, but also to stand back and ask ourselves whether the reactions of the characters are appropriate to their circumstance, or to question the assumptions underlying our own reactions to it. It is this kind of critical reading and judgment that many of us would like students to bring to bear on the images and stories they encounter in the media (see, for example, Laurance Splitter and Ann Sharp’s *Teaching for Better Thinking*). It is this niche that has been filled by Newswise. The richness of Newswise is the way it attends to, and encourages the development of, these multiple dimensions of literacy while at the same time promoting reflection and inquiry.

Newswise presents topical issues covered in the news in a format that promotes the development of literacy, engages students and teachers in critical reflection and prompts further philosophical and general inquiry based on issues raised by the story. The stories selected have wide international appeal. Newswise comes in two versions - Junior (appropriate for ages 8-14) and Senior (appropriate for ages 11-18). The texts presented in Newswise sometimes appear directly as they were printed in the newspaper, at other times they have been rewritten especially for Newswise around a theme that was in the news. For reasons of language, articles appearing in the Junior Newswise are more likely to be rewritten than those appearing in the senior version.

For first time visitors to Newswise, I suggest arriving via a detour through SAPERE. (The Society for Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in education). Their web address (URL) is:

<http://sapere.net/>

Once there select ‘Philosophy for Children’ which will take you to:

http://sapere.net/main_file.php/84

Here you will find a clear and articulate account of what philosophical inquiry offers children and education. It is definitely worth reading. These goals are consistent with those of Newswise. The link to Newswise can then be found in the list of items (in red) on the left hand side of the page.

The latest story posted for discussion (and the first in the new format) is titled «Single Mum’s Global Clean-up». It can be read as a regular html file, or can be downloaded (and printed) as an Adobe Acrobat file in a slightly more sophisticated style (allowing for tables and diagrams). In both cases, the text, discussion plans and exercises are formatted ready to be printed for student use.

Susan Makador was worried about money. She had a 10-year-old son, no husband and lot of debts... One day the telephone rang. The person at the end of the line tried to persuade her to buy a lottery ticket. She said no, but a few days later, the same person rang again. After four or five calls, Susan decided to spend \$100 on the lottery. Perhaps she would be lucky. You never know...

The pun in the title soon becomes clear as we read on - money starts arriving in Susan's bank account - has she won the lottery? Is this a reasonable assumption for Susan to make? Susan begins to spend and invest the money.' but then her account is frozen. It was not her money after all, it was money that had gone astray from the United Nations environment fund. Who is responsible for the mistake? Should the bank ask Susan to return the money? What of the people who have given their money to protect the environment in good faith? The story is all the more engaging and interesting because we know it actually occurred. This is a real moral situation, not merely a hypothetical dilemma. It is an excellent example of the kind of news items that have the potential to spark substantive philosophical inquiry.

Following the story are a variety of activities structured around the British National Literacy Strategy. The purpose of each set of activities is clearly explained in a separate document titled «using Newswise». Language skills covered here include: prediction, chronological sequencing, comprehension, identifying key sentences and ideas, summarizing, distinguishing facts from opinions, and creative writing (imaginary exploration of points of view and perspectives). Following these activities is a section titled «Hidden Gold» - it is here that we find food for philosophical inquiry.

The format of exercises and discussion plans provided under «hidden gold» will be familiar to those who have used the IAPC curriculum. One of the strengths of the hidden gold section is that it explores a wide range of issues that emerge from the story rather than focusing on one or two leading ideas. With over a dozen different themes or concepts developed around each story, the chances that some of these areas are relevant to the students' interests and questions is fairly high. The focus is also spread broadly between philosophical issues (in this case, moral questions) and conceptual clarification (e.g.; different meanings of the term `security') and exploring the relation between concepts (owing and owning, pleasure and pain, persuasion and decision). Introductory comments often help focus and deepen the activity - for instance in one exercise where students are asked to number a `list of worries' according to what worries them the most, the introduction raises the question of whether that which worries us 'the most' is that which worries us 'most often' or 'most deeply'. The last section offered moves from philosophy to exploration on the web. Taking a major theme from the story, further URLs are offered as starting points for lines of research and project work.

Perhaps two areas that the constructors of Newswise might like to address as the site develops further are (i) to offer teachers a parallel resource linking the issues explored in the story with the philosophical tradition (along the lines of the 'leading ideas' in the IAPC materials), and (ii) to strengthen the developmental aspect of the exercises and discussion plans.

The feature of Newswise that, to my mind, justifies its position on the web (for up to this point I have been describing written resources that could just as easily be produced via other technologies) is the Newswise Forum. The forum provides a space for participants to post their own responses and writings around the issues raised by the story. The real strength of the forum is that the Newswise facilitators (Steve Williams, Roger Suttcliff, and Karin Murriss) take an active role in responding to contributions. They highlight the philosophical dimension of the contribution in an intelligent and accessible way, offer encouragement and develop further areas for discussion. It is this feature that makes it possible for single subscribers to enter into an international community of inquiry. Indeed my own past experience with Newswise was with using it for individual students with learning difficulties, and it was the feedback provided via the forum that kept the students eager and motivated. While the forum is not yet operational for the new version of Newswise, a sample of the forum drawn from one of the earlier versions of Newswise can be seen by clicking on the Forum tag or going to

http://sapere.net/main_file.php/801

With the new subscription version of Newswise comes a further resource - 3 multimedia editions per year. While the first of these will not appear until around mid February, a description of the multimedia edition can be found by clicking on the text «why not find out more?» on the http://sapere.net/main_file.php/80 site. The multimedia edition promises (i) speech support for the story (children's voices pronouncing difficult, new or specialized words) and language exercises, (ii) a «Reader's Theatre» script, (iii) recorded snippets of children's discussion with a commentary, (iv) a dialogue maker (to help children construct their own dialogues), and (vi) thinking tools (including a simple argument analysis technique). Work generated through this website can be stored and printed.

Overall, this new site shows enormous promise and potential. I have no doubt it will be one of the real success stories of Philosophical Inquiry on the web. Newswise can be bought from the website with a secure credit card transaction. This enables people around the world to buy it without having to worry about currency conversion.

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