

Dress Rehearsal for Life: Using Drama to Teach Philosophy to Inner-City High School Students

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This article is about an experimental enrichment program for inner-city high school students called Carroll-Cleveland Philosophers' Program. It involves busing forty Cleveland high school students to the John Carroll University Campus to study philosophy and engage in various service learning activities. Through the process of writing a textbook for the course, we have developed a distinctive "drama pedagogy". It asks the students to write philosophical dialogues and perform them on videotape. In this article, I will raise the question of whether this pedagogy teaches philosophy. Relying on Martin Heidegger's notion of *Being In*, I argue that it does.

Over the past few years I've been involved in an experimental enrichment program for inner-city high school students called Carroll-Cleveland Philosophers' Program (hereafter 'CCPP'). Dr. Jennifer Merritt conceived and launched CCPP at our university, John Carroll, in the year 2000. Having taught a philosophy curriculum known as the Touchstone series in a Virginia prison, Dr. Merritt set out to reach at-risk teenagers *before* they ran into trouble with the law. CCPP has taken several different forms over the years. In what follows I would like to describe its latest incarnation, which worked so well that we hope it to be permanent.

Our class consists of approximately forty high school students drawn from five different high schools throughout the Cleveland public school district, one of the lowest performing school districts in the nation. The students bus to John Carroll's lovely suburban campus and meet in a high tech classroom. In the morning, we study philosophy. Then the students eat together and move on to an afternoon activity which might involve service learning, a field trip, an art project, or a career workshop.

It takes a rather large staff team, including three faculty members and ten undergraduate teaching assistants, along with funding from various sources, to plan and execute CCPP Fridays. While there are many facets to the program, it is called a *philosophers'* program because philosophy is at its core. Dr. Merritt originally identified philosophy as the crucial ingredient for the education of at-risk teenagers for three main reasons: it promotes critical thinking, it fosters community, and it validates the unique perspective of each individual student. These three factors can have a transformative effect on young people, and CCPP has witnessed some of these transformations. My colleague Dr. Paul Thomson and believe that there's an important sense in which every teenager is at-risk (in the end, aren't we all?). So we have written a two-volume textbook for teaching philosophy to high school students to be published by Prufrock Press.

The volumes are organized topically. They cover most of the same classic philosophical issues and authors that one might study in a typical college 'Introduction to Philosophy' course, except everything is explained at a more basic level. Chapter titles include: What is love? Should we accept reality? Why should we protect the environment? and What is the meaning of life? What makes the *Wondering* volumes unique, however, is that each chapter begins with a short philosophical dialogue between two fictional high school students. In each dialogue, the characters fall into conversation about the issue the chapter concerns. At the end of each dialogue there are discussion questions and one of the exercises at the end of each chapter asks the students to write a dialogue of their own demonstrating the philosophical concepts and positions they've learned.

The following is an example from the end of volume two:

CHAPTER THIRTEEN WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

Dialogue Thirteen: The Chore

<Shannon is walking down the street when she sees Devon mowing his backyard. She calls his name. He pauses for a moment and waves to her. Then he returns to his work. Shannon is about to continue on her way, but she changes her mind and dashes across the yard to him.>

Shannon: <Shouting> "How's it going, Devon?" <She waits for him to turn and look.> "It seems like you're always mowin' this yard."

Devon: <Stopping the mower, wiping his brow> "Yeah. Every week."

Shannon: "What a drag! All that work and then it doesn't even keep. You have to do it over and over again. That would make me crazy!"

Devon: "I dunno. It's just like anything else." <He kneels to retie his shoe.> "Like, you spend all night studying for a test and you're so happy to have it done, but there's another one just around the corner. Or how it takes an hour to get all showered, shaved, dressed, and ready in the morning, but you have to do it all over again the next day. Nothing really lasts."

Shannon: <Sitting on the grass> "I don't see it that way. The tests we take are leading to graduation. And it matters how you look—like, for making friends and getting a good job. All that stuff adds up."

Devon: <Stretching out on the grass beside her> "What—graduate, get married, buy a house, and have a kid so he can mow the yard?"

Shannon: "Well . . . maybe. <She bursts out laughing.> "Yeah, okay. What's so bad about that?" <She punches his arm.>

Devon: <Cringing> "I didn't say there was anything bad about it. It just proves everything is ultimately pointless."

Shannon: <Alarmed> "Why pointless? If reaching those goals makes me happy, then that's the point. The point is to be happy."

Devon: <Looking at her thoughtfully> "Are you happy now?"

Shannon: "Not especially. But once I graduate, get married, buy a house, and have a kid who can mow the yard I will be." <She grins.>

Devon: <Nodding slowly with a grim look on his face> "Sure."

Shannon: "Look, maybe the point of the whole thing is to get to heaven some day." <She lies back on the grass and gazes up at the sky.> "That would definitely make even mowing the lawn worthwhile."

Question Set

Why does Devon think life is pointless? Why does Shannon think life has a point? Who do you agree with more and why? Do you ever feel that you do the same things over and over again? Name some examples. What

is the point of life in your view?

Exercises

1. Write a dialogue between Ernesto and Brianna. Ernesto argues that nothing comes of what humans do. Brianna argues that humans have accomplished many things of lasting value.

As our CCPP philosophy course evolved, using dialogue skits has become central to our teaching methodology. In fact, a typical two hour class-period goes as follows: (1) we read aloud parts of our chapter for the day; (2) we watch a dialogue performed by our teaching assistants; (3) we write answers to questions about the dialogue; (4) we engage in small group discussions; (5) we write skits; (6) we perform the skits for the class, and share our reactions. The culminating project for the course involves making a DVD of the best skits and showing it for parents, teachers, and administrators on the last day of class. This “drama pedagogy” is our point of departure from Matthew Lipman’s famous technique of using story-telling to teach philosophy to pre-teens (See Lipman, 1999). Teenagers typically enjoy performance, whether as performer or as audience, or both. Moreover, making a DVD raises the stakes for everyone, lending the course an exciting, professional feeling. Copies of the DVD also make a great souvenir for the course.

It is not hard for CCPP to be educational at some level. Even setting aside the various afternoon activities, the morning philosophy class promotes reading, writing, and oral communication skills. But does it teach philosophy? Is our class anything other than some kind of hybrid English and Theater class? I believe that it is. My experience with CCPP indicates that the drama pedagogy I’ve described is a successful method for teaching philosophy to high school students. Martin Heidegger provides a theoretical framework for understanding why.

What is it we are trying to teach when we teach philosophy? In CCPP philosophy class, we tell our students that philosophy is talking about controversial ideas. In the introduction to our textbook, we write that philosophy means learning to disagree with others in a productive manner. Both of these things are true. But philosophy is also something deeper. As a matter of fact, this deeper thing is actually the whole reason for doing it. The thing I’m referring to is not to be found in English literature or theater—or rather, it is only when they wax philosophical. We all know and recognize this thing, and instinctively regard it as extremely valuable. Like all of the best things in life, it is very hard to capture in words. Yet Martin Heidegger is famous for capturing it in his classic work of phenomenology, *Being and Time*.

In this work, Heidegger ambitiously proposes to investigate *Dasein*, “the entity which each of us is himself.” In attempting to define who and what the self is, Heidegger distinguishes various authentic and inauthentic ways of being in the world. Crucial to the authentic self is discourse. Discourse is how we disclose or “open ourselves up” to the world. Heidegger asserts that discourse is constitutive for *Dasein*’s existence. (Heidegger, p. 204, 1962)

But discourse is different from the language we use every day to get by in the world. In our everyday life we face constant pressure to concern ourselves with the hustle and bustle of objects and events. This often renders true discourse quite rare. Heidegger writes,

Discourse, which belongs to the essential state of *Dasein*’s Being and has a share in constituting *Dasein*’s disclosedness, has the possibility of becoming idle talk. And when it does so, it serves not so much to keep Being-in-the-world open for us in an articulated understanding, as rather to close it off, and cover up the entities within-the-world. . . . This closing-off is aggravated afresh by the fact that an understanding of what is talked about is supposedly reached in idle talk. Because of this, idle talk discourages any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppresses them and holds them back. . . . There are many things with which we first become acquainted in this way, and there is not a little which never gets

beyond such an average understanding. . . . (Heidegger, p. 213, 1962)

We gather from Heidegger that human beings spend a vast portion of their lives in idle talk. Idle talk on TV, idle talk on the phone, idle talk at parties, in the hallways, at the water cooler, and even in the classroom. What did he say, what did she say, and what happened next? Who won the game? Who sang that song? and What will the weather be like tomorrow? Hasn't it been cold? How I hate the cold. Will spring ever come? There is a steady stream of idle talk running through our heads. What shall I wear today? How will I get these errands done? Who's hotter: Johnny Depp or Tom Cruise?

There's nothing especially evil about idle talk. On the contrary, it can be lighthearted and fun and an important part of community building. What makes it problematic is that it grows like a weed and can easily crowd out that very same something we have set out to identify. Heidegger writes,

Idle talk, which closes things off in the way we have designated, is the kind of Being which belongs to Dasein's understanding when that understanding has been uprooted. But idle talk does not occur as a condition which is present-at-hand in something present-at-hand: idle talk has been uprooted existentially, and this uprooting is constant. Ontologically this means that when Dasein maintains itself in idle talk, it is—as Being-in-the-world—cut off from its primary and primordially genuine relationships-of-Being towards the world, towards Dasein-with, and towards its very Being-in. (Heidegger, p. 214, 1962)

Being-in. It is one of those magical capitalized, hyphenated words that holds volumes of significance. Idle talk crowds out genuine relationships and Being-in. Being in what? Being in the moment? Heidegger is talking about those rare and special moments when you are really yourself and you make an absolutely profound connection with someone else who is really being him- or herself. On the street you call it “being real,” and although this terminology lacks Heidegger's mystical sophistication, it is also less pretentious and applies readily to the case at hand.

Being real is no simple thing. First of all, it's risky and therefore not the kind of thing you do with strangers or even acquaintances. You make yourself vulnerable when you're real, and so you have to decide very carefully who to be real with. Secondly, it's exhausting. No one could ever be real all day every day. You have to be up for it, and the occasion has to be right. Finally, being real can change you. After an instance of true discourse with another human being you might never be the same again. And there may be consequences. It might cause the end of a marriage, the loss of a job, or a family rift. So it is no surprise that a lot of people prefer to stick to idle talk.

At the same time, a lifetime full of idle talk is not a fully human life. It is a superficial shell of an existence. I believe this is what Socrates was trying to get at when he said “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The deeper thing that we are trying to teach when we teach philosophy is being real. But we don't *say* that this is what we are trying to teach, and we don't even try to teach it, because in truth it can't be taught. All you can do is set the conditions where this sort of disclosure can happen.

I maintain that, for high school students, drama pedagogy sets the right conditions for disclosure. You don't sit down with high school students and say, “Okay, let's be real.” There are way too many layers of mistrust, boredom, and sheer inexperience to cut through. They may tell you what they think you want to hear, they may yank your chain, or they may just blow you off. And who could blame them? No one can get real on command. The only thing you can do is set the stage. There may be different ways to do this, but we have found that, with high school students, setting the stage means literally setting the stage. Invite them to take on the persona of someone else and suddenly they are free. They are set free by the ambiguity of the situation. What they are saying may represent their own views or may not. They can experiment and find out what really matters to them and how it might feel to share it.

My role in the program keeps me somewhat removed from the students. The undergraduate teaching assistants lead the small group discussions while the faculty members present the big picture, plan, and oversee class activities. But as I present, plan, and oversee, I observe. Amid a great deal of idle talk, I witness snippets of discourse. On one occasion, for example, I stopped to check on a group discussing how to make a skit about

lying. The week before, they had written a very funny skit about genetic engineering. The group was now expressing general dissatisfaction with the philosophers we had read that morning. The philosophers, in their view, had unrealistic views about the immorality of lying. One young man, clad in sweatshirt, earring, and do-rag suddenly spoke up: "People lie all the time. It's the way of the world," he said. When everyone turned to look at him, he went on: "No more comedian show. We got to tell it like it is." And then he looked right at me and the passion of his own experience with lying was written all over his face as he said: "I want to make them cry." The resulting skit was very serious and very moving. The following is a segment of dialogue from it:

Black young man: You know what I realized? We got a big problem in this country. You know what it is? It's inequality. You always hear people in the government, people on the news talkin' about equal rights. We all 'sposed to have equal rights. But it's just not true. People get discriminated against every day. Which is hard.

White young man: But it's, like, 2005 now. We've really come a long way, you have to admit. Like, we have programs out there. You see minorities in all aspects~government, big companies, everywhere. I just don't see the problem with inequality.

Black young man: Your right, it's 2005. It shouldn't be a problem anymore. But how come America's prisons is mostly minorities, and America's army is mostly minorities?

<More examples of inequality and testimony from black cast members follow. The white young man continues to try to explain them away.>

White young man: I guess-I don't know. I'm a little embarrassed. I just don't live in the same world as you guys. I don't see the same things you guys do. All I know is what I see on the news. And I guess that's not helping much. It seems like I'm living a lie.

I don't mean to suggest that all and only serious moments are real. In fact, false gravity is one very common (and very annoying) form of idle talk. Nor do I mean to suggest that self-discovery and disclosure always occurs during our skits in class. Many of our skits are pure fun. And in most of them the students are only *pretending* to have a philosophical moment. But this is a deliberate part of our pedagogy. By going through the motions in class, the students are rehearsing for real life: they will be more ready for a real philosophical moment with family or friends outside of class when the opportunity presents itself. The following script, for example, demonstrates the students' own ambivalent attitude toward art. On the one hand, they have experienced frustration when others have not appreciated their artistic efforts. On the other hand, they still have trouble appreciating classic and contemporary works of art. The dialogue raises questions about the nature of art that the students can go on to explore in their own real lives.

Ms. Little Art Class

Teacher: Today class, we're going to draw something that represents you. Teresa, you're first.

<Teresa draws flowers.>

Teacher: That's good you drew flowers. That's something that's real. I like that. It's bright, like springtime. Okay, Rhonda?

<Rhonda draws a smiley face.>

Teacher: Okay, smiley face, that's real nice. Happy. You're happy all the time. I like that. Okay, Tom?

<Tom draws a hat.>

Teacher: Oh, you drew a hat because you're a boy and boys wear hats. I like that. That's art for real. Okay, Tatianna?

<Tatianna draws squiggly lines.>

Teacher: Um, wait a minute, what is that?

Tatianna: That's God, girl!

Teacher: That's not God, that's squiggly lines.

Tatianna: That's how I see God.

Teacher: That's not . . . that's not real. That's not something that imitates life. That's not art at all.

Tatianna: That's how I imitate my life!

Teacher: I don't like that. <turning to the rest of the class> You all don't like that, do you all?

Teresa: How can you say you don't like her picture just because it's not something you think is realistic? What if it's realistic to her?

Teacher: But it's not. Does that look like God to you?

Rhonda: Nobody knows what God looks like. It could be a spirit or something inside of her and so she chose to display it that way. I mean really, like, what is art? How can you judge it?

The process of writing these lines, rehearsing, and delivering them is practice for real life. It is very easy to picture a conversation like this arising for the students with family or friends. At the very least they now know that this is a philosophical conversation; that is, they know that there will be different opinions, each worthy of respect, and they may even be better able to articulate their own.

While making the skits is itself a philosophical enterprise, reflecting upon the making of the skits provides another level of insight. We found this out by accident when we began making a documentary of the course. Originally we planned to make a documentary for the purpose of promoting the program. Little did we know that the interviews and the field work it required would themselves become important pedagogical tools.

It is difficult to obtain permission to film minors if you wish to use the footage as part of a study. Parents are often reluctant to give permission to researchers to use footage of their children for experimental purposes. Furthermore, researchers wishing to use such footage experimentally must obtain permission from their university's Internal Review Board. Obtaining permission to videotape for a documentary, however, requires only parental permission. Parents and students are both apt to like the idea of making a movie about the class.

Our documentary of this course serves three main purposes. First, it makes an excellent vehicle for publicity. There is no question that the philosophy for children movement needs publicity in order to survive and flourish in the United States. If we truly believe that philosophy is needed in the high school curriculum, then we must make every effort to promote the cause. Opportunities for promotion range from research fairs, to academic conferences, to public television, to commercial distribution. In theory, a really good class and a very talented editor could make an award winning feature length film out of this material. We are satisfied, however, if we succeed in raising awareness about the course.

Second, the documentary provides incentive for student performance. The dialogue pedagogy that we outlined above requires enthusiastic participation. We have found that videotaping the performances in class raises the quality of the exercise. It gives them a reason to compose a careful script and rehearse it. Furthermore, it enables them to watch themselves later, reflecting further on the material. It gives them motivation to follow through and achieve, because the best dialogue can be included in the final cut of the documentary. Once the students see themselves on the big screen they realize the importance of their contribution to the class.

Third, the documentary serves as a memento for all of the participants in the course. When working with young people on experimental pedagogies it is important to bring their family members on board as early as possible. This is especially crucial with inner-city parents for whom philosophy may be a completely unknown quantity. One way to bring them on board is to include footage of family members in the documentary. They can be videotaped in groups at parent-teacher dinners or interviewed individually. Including footage of family and sending a copy home with the student at the end of the course reinforces a sense of community.

A documentary can track the transformative effect philosophy has on the lives of our students. As documentary scholar A. W. Bluem writes,

Documentary is more than an idea. It is an undeniable form of public communication, functioning within certain ascertainable conditions. Valid documentary must involve more than presentation of the records of life. There must be a social purpose in its conception and the use of a technology which permits a significant impact in its dissemination.

Almost all kinds of human communication have some social purpose. The element as stated implies, however, something more specific: the presentation of socially useful information to a public. From such information comes knowledge, and from knowledge is derived the understanding which can lead to societal action. Documentary communication seeks to initiate a process which culminates in public action by presenting information, and to complete the process by making this presentation persuasive. Documentary seeks to inform but, above all, it seeks to influence. [Bluem, p. 14]

Videotaping is remarkably inexpensive. Most universities have all the necessary equipment and \$100 will buy more tapes than you probably care to edit. Since philosophical pedagogy mandates that we put as much of the course into the students' hands as possible, you can train the students to use the equipment.

So, to conclude, I have said that CCPP has adopted drama pedagogy because it provides a framework for teaching students how to disagree with one another about controversial ideas in a productive way, where there are two distinct levels of productivity. On the surface, they learn how to be polite and respectful, how to express themselves effectively and with confidence, both in written and oral contexts. On the deeper level, however, they gain the opportunity to experience transformative philosophical moments, either with one another in class or with others outside of class. Ironically, pretending to be someone else shows us how to be ourselves more fully.

Sources

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