

«The Coolest Subject on the Planet»

How Philosophy Made its Way in Ontario's High Schools

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To many philosophers, it is strikingly obvious that philosophy should be taught at the high school level. These are the critical years when students are exploring their assumptions and calling into question the values and worldviews of their parents, peers, and society. Training in philosophy can provide high school students with powerful tools of analysis and critical reasoning, new ways of looking at the world, and new approaches to problem solving. It can also help students to situate their inquiries within the context of a 2,500 year old discipline, and thereby develop their sense of themselves as part of a shared and ongoing conversation. Curiously, however, philosophy is part of the official secondary school curriculum in only a handful of developed countries around the world. Still more curiously, North America lags far behind Western Europe in this regard. For the most part, philosophy is taught in only a small number of public and private secondary schools across North America, often as part of a course in another discipline. Why North America lags so far behind is open to conjecture. A number of extra-philosophical factors would obviously need to be explored to arrive at an adequate explanation for the slow entry of philosophy into North American secondary school education. These factors might include, for example, suspicions among policy makers and education interest groups that philosophy is a potentially subversive subject; theories of cognitive development in educational psychology that hold that adolescents are neither emotionally nor intellectually mature enough for philosophical thinking; and stereotypes about philosophy as an impractical and abstruse subject with little «real world» application. Other factors might include disciplinary rivalries within the secondary school curriculum, curricular inertia, lack of adequate funding in schools and school boards, and the absence of teacher training programmes in the colleges of education. However, it is not the focus of this paper to supply an explanation for why philosophy has been so slow in gaining entry into the secondary school curriculum.

Surprisingly, there is one educational jurisdiction in North America (outside of Quebec's CEGEP system) that has bucked the trend, and that now offers a stand-alone philosophy course as part of its official secondary school curriculum: Ontario. Since 1994-95 Ontario has offered an OAC Philosophy (Ontario Academic Course) to its high school students. The course is an elective that is offered to students in their final (fifth) year of high school. For reasons of administrative convenience, the course is currently housed in the History section of the secondary school curriculum, although it can be (and is) taught by teachers outside of History.

In what follows I will explore the main reasons why philosophy has been successfully introduced into the Ontario secondary school curriculum - in spite of the numerous odds against it, and in spite of a long tradition in secondary school education that has excluded philosophy. The main reasons for its success, I contend, is that it has been supported by good organization, effective long-range planning, and well-targeted lobbying efforts on the part of a handful of dedicated philosophers and teachers in the universities and secondary schools. However, while these are the main reasons, they are not the only reasons. It has also helped that there have been receptive policy makers and administrators in the Curriculum Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Education; and that it has received moral and practical support from the Departments of Philosophy in universities and colleges across Ontario. It has also helped that those involved in lobbying for the course and developing it have maintained strategically a low profile, in order not to attract the attention of education interest groups that might regard philosophy as an inappropriate subject for high school education.

While these are the reasons why philosophy has been successfully introduced into the Ontario secondary school curriculum, they do not explain why it has taken root and flourished. This can be attributed, among other things, to the enthusiasm and energy of the students who are taking the course, and to the hard work and dedication of the teachers who are teaching it.

In what follows I will outline the history and development of the high school philosophy course in Ontario. Along the way I will address briefly the content of the course, and discuss some of the pedagogical tools deployed by teachers. The lessons learned in Ontario may be relevant for high school philosophy teachers, as well as teachers of philosophy for children, in other provinces and states, in their efforts to incorporate philosophy into the official school curriculum.

LOBBYING

The story of the high school philosophy course begins some fifty years ago. The idea of a high school level philosophy course started in the 1950's with a group of philosophers from the University of Toronto. Their efforts were met with strong resistance from a number of interest groups, some of which argued that philosophy should not be part of the curriculum because it could undermine religion and morality. Ontario in the 1950's was a socially and religiously conservative province, and the Ministry of Education, responding to the concerns of these interest groups, blocked the effort. Another attempt was made in the 1970's, but failed from lack of momentum and organization. Finally, in the mid-1980's, a number of university philosophers and high school teachers, with the support of the Committee of Chairs of Ontario Philosophy Departments, banded together and mobilized their resources to lobby the Curriculum and Assessment Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. One of the key breakthroughs in the lobbying effort came simply with identifying the right administrators and policy makers in the Ministry, an organization of labyrinthine complexity.

During this time the Committee of Chairs established the Ontario Secondary School Philosophy Project (OSSPP). The mandate of the OSSPP was to encourage liaison between philosophy teachers in

secondary schools, colleges, and universities; to work with the Ministry of Education and Training; and to serve as the umbrella organization for those supportive of introducing philosophy into the secondary school curriculum. Prof. Frank Cunningham (Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto) and Prof. Ian Winchester (formerly OISE, currently Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary) were the founding Co-Chairs of the Project. The OSSPP continues to this day, and it is serving as a model for other provincial groups now exploring the possibility of establishing philosophy in their respective provinces. Following this model, the Canadian Philosophical Association has also established a committee on pre-university philosophy, and is hosting a meeting of provincial groups at its annual convention.

In the discussions with the Ministry in the 1980's, it was clear that approval for an OAC in philosophy could have been given relatively quickly on the condition that it be presented as a course in critical thinking. However, all the philosophers concerned felt that this would be inappropriate, as it would risk diluting the philosophical content of the course. After several years of dialogue with officials in the Ministry, the go-ahead was given for a proper stand-alone philosophy course, one that would emphasize mainly the problems of philosophy, followed by the history of philosophy, and critical thinking skills. In the summer of 1993 a group of eight writers drawn from a number of Ontario universities and high schools assembled and produced the Curriculum Guideline for OAC Philosophy.

The course devised by the writers is a standard 110 hour elective course. It has a prerequisite of at least one credit in an advanced level senior division course in English. A French translation of the Guideline was also produced, for use in the province's French schools. As the Guideline makes clear, the course is primarily an introduction to philosophical thinking and philosophical problems, rather than a course on the history of philosophy. It also makes it clear that the course is not limited exclusively to Western philosophy: provision is made, for example, for studying Eastern philosophy and African philosophy.

The Guideline includes the following components: Rationale, Learning Outcomes, Course Content, Considerations for Planning, and Evaluation of Student Achievement. The Course Content is divided into three units: Introduction to Philosophical Inquiry (10%), Overview of the Areas of Philosophy (60%), and Exploration of Topics in Depth (30%). The Introduction serves to acquaint students with the various types of philosophical questions and problems, the different areas of philosophy, and the different methods of philosophy. The Overview of the Areas of Philosophy gives teachers and students the flexibility of exploring four of the seven major areas of philosophy (philosophy of human nature, ethics, social and political philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics, logic and philosophy of science, aesthetics, and metaphysics), including at least one of the first three of this group. The third unit allows teachers and students to explore in greater depth one or two aspects of philosophy that were surveyed in the Overview. One of the expectations is that part of the work for this unit be completed in the form of an independent study project.

Currently, there are no training prerequisites that teachers must meet in order to teach OAC Philosophy. Those teaching the course are drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds: for example, history, English, mathematics, music, law, and world religions. They are mostly a self-selecting group. While there is no

data available, it is clear from anecdotal reports that many of the teachers have had some prior exposure to philosophy, usually in the form of a major or minor specialization in philosophy in an undergraduate degree. There are others who have little or no formal training, and are learning as they teach it. At this stage there is no teacher training for philosophy teachers in the province's Faculties of Education, and no «Additional Qualification» courses that cover the discipline. Moreover, philosophy is not considered to be a «teachable subject» (i.e., a core course such as English, French, or History). As the OAC Philosophy becomes more popular, and as demand for teachers grows, it can be expected that the demand for teacher training will grow.

At the time of designing the Course Guideline the writers debated the merits of this arrangement, and the unwelcome possibility that teachers with insufficient knowledge of philosophy might end up teaching the course. They concluded that on the whole it was better to launch the course forthwith and develop momentum, and to examine the question of teacher training at a later stage once a critical mass had been reached. This stage has now been reached, and preliminary discussions are underway between teachers.

From anecdotal reports and from Ministry statistics, it is clear that OAC Philosophy has proven to be one of the most popular additions to the OAC curriculum. Province-wide enrollment for the course in 1994-95, when it was first introduced, was approximately 200, in some 10-15 schools. Few teachers and principals then knew about the course, as there was no central organization to advertise it, and to bring together interested teachers for conferences, workshops, or professional development days. By 1997-98, however, word had spread through informal teacher networks and subject associations, and enrollment for the course (according to Ministry statistics) had grown to 5500, in over 135 secondary schools across the province - a 27-fold increase in enrollment in just four years! In 1998-99, enrollment was over 6000, in some 140 schools (of the province's approximately 800 secondary schools). Many high schools where the course is offered report having to put on extra sections to meet the high levels of enrollment. For instance, the first year the course was offered at Jarvis Collegiate, in downtown Toronto, over 150 students enrolled.

The course is reported to be extremely popular with students, and appears to be meeting a genuine educational need. In the words of one student at Jarvis Collegiate, philosophy is «the coolest subject on the planet.» The course is also reported to be popular with teachers, who enjoy the enthusiasm of students, and who find it dovetails well with other disciplines.

It appears that concerns that exposure to philosophical inquiry may harm a young student's intellectual or emotional development have failed to materialize. While it is true that philosophy has the power to destabilize certain beliefs, it is also true that it has the power to provide rational support for beliefs that would not otherwise have found such support. Moreover, anecdotal reports suggest that those teaching the course are experienced teachers who know how to present both sides of the positions they are studying, and know how to temper any potential shocks that may be occasioned by philosophical ideas.

THE NEW CURRICULUM

In the last 3 years the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, at the behest of the current provincial government, has been instituting sweeping educational reforms, including developing a new secondary

school curriculum. One of the biggest reforms in the curriculum is the elimination of the OAC level: that is, grade 13. From 2002 on, high school will be completed in 4 years, thereby bringing Ontario into line with the other provinces.

When these reforms were first announced, there were indications from officials in the Ministry that philosophy could be struck from the curriculum altogether. While no clear reasons were given, it can be surmised that philosophy was regarded by some policy makers in the provincial government as an irrelevant subject that had little usefulness in providing the «skill sets» needed for the province's future economic growth. At that stage the OSSPP rallied to the cause and successfully lobbied the Ministry to preserve philosophy. Letters from teachers, university professors, Chairs of philosophy departments, and even high school students helped to convince the policy makers to reconsider. In the many subsequent levels of Ministry-sponsored feasibility studies, background reports, and feedback meetings, philosophy was included along with all other subjects.

At the next stage of the curriculum restructuring process, in 1997-98, the Co-Chairs of the OSSPP (Frank Cunningham and David Jopling) served as consultants to a Ministry-commissioned background feasibility report entitled «Social Science 2. Family Studies, Philosophy, Society: Challenge and Change,» by Annette Yeager and Annabelle Slocum (Queen's Printer Ontario, 1997). This was forwarded to a series of «Expert Panels» commissioned by the Ministry to assess the feasibility of each course.

Later in 1998, once the Expert Panels had made their reports, the Ministry sent out requests for proposals for curriculum writing teams. The Co-Chairs of the OSSPP were asked to be the writers for the new Philosophy course that would come to replace the OAC Philosophy. During the summer of 1998 - and continuing well into 2000 - they worked as part of a team of writers from other disciplines assembled to produce the Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum.

Once there were assurances that philosophy would not be eliminated from the new curriculum, the Co-Chairs of the OSSPP, along with the Committee of Chairs of Ontario Philosophy Departments, successfully persuaded the Ministry to include two new philosophy courses in the new curriculum, one at the Grade 11 level and one at the Grade 12 level. This was a major coup, and it is expected to make a significant difference to secondary school education in Ontario.

When the new secondary school curriculum is phased in during the next three years, two new philosophy courses will take the place of OAC Philosophy: a grade 11 open course called «Philosophy: The Big Questions», and a grade 12 university-streamed course called «Philosophy: Questions and Theories.» The writing process, which is nearing completion, involved many dozens of meetings with curriculum writers from other disciplines, Ministry personnel, feedback groups, philosophy departments, high school teachers - and, most importantly, high school students.

The Grade 11 course is a 110-hour elective course that is structured around six big questions of philosophy: What is a person? What is a meaningful life? What are good and evil? What is a just society? What is

human knowledge? How do we know what is beautiful in art, music, and literature. Teachers are given the option of addressing at least three of the questions. The goal of the course is to introduce philosophy to students who may not be university-bound, and who may not otherwise have an opportunity to study philosophy. There is no prerequisite for the course. The course is divided into the following strands, each one of which is woven around the six big questions: Philosophical Questions, Philosophical Theories, Philosophy and Everyday Life, Applications of Philosophy to Other Subjects, and Research and Inquiry Skills.

The Grade 12 course is structured around six major areas of philosophy: Metaphysics, Logic and the Philosophy of Science, Epistemology, Ethics, Social and Political Philosophy, and Aesthetics. The goal of the course is to introduce philosophy to students who are university-bound. The prerequisite for the course is any university or university/college course in social sciences and humanities, English, or Canadian and world studies. Teachers are given the option of addressing at least three of the majors areas of philosophy. By the end of the course students are expected to: demonstrate an understanding of some of the main questions of the relevant areas; demonstrate an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of responses to some of the main questions of the areas that are given by major philosophers or schools of philosophy; defend their own responses to some of the main questions (of, for example, metaphysics) in exchanges with others; demonstrate the relevance of these philosophical questions and theories to everyday life; and show how philosophical theories are presupposed in other subjects.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Until very recently, the majority of teachers of OAC Philosophy have worked in isolation from one another. Other than an informal list of some 35 names, no central and complete database of names of teachers and schools where the course was taught was available; moreover, no central organization existed to serve the interests of high school philosophy teachers. Those days are over. First, in 1996, a new website for high school philosophy was established, at the behest of the OSSPP and the Committee of Chairs. The High School Philosophy Website Project is designed and directed by Prof. Chris Olsen (Dept. of Theory and Policy Studies, OISE/UT). The address for the website is <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~hsphil>. The website provides a continual update of information about secondary school philosophy in the province. It also has information about the collections of introductory philosophy textbooks housed at the Departments of Philosophy at the University of Toronto and York University.

Second, in May 1999 the first-ever Conference on Teaching Philosophy in High School was held at OISE/UT, with attendance of over 100 teachers, faculty, and students, from all parts of the province. The conference was organized by Profs. Jopling, Olsen, and Cunningham, and was sponsored by the OSSPP, the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at OISE/UT, the Philosophy Departments at York University and the University of Toronto, and the Faculty of Education at York University. Sessions in the conference included: the new curriculum, teaching strategies, textbooks and reading materials, evaluation and grading strategies, teacher training in the Faculties of Education, and high school-university liaison. The conference by all accounts was a major success.

From that conference emerged a new association for secondary school philosophy teachers: the Ontario Philosophy Teacher's Association. The goal of the association is to represent the interests of philosophy teachers to the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ontario College of Teachers, and the boards of education across the province; to organize conferences and workshops; and to facilitate professional development. Currently an interim board of directors directs the association. The first election of officers will be held at the second annual conference, tentatively scheduled for May 2000.

PEDAGOGY

Teachers of both the OAC Philosophy and the two new philosophy courses are given a large amount of flexibility in how they interpret the Course Guidelines and meet the teaching expectations. The individual syllabi vary according to teacher expertise and student interest, with some syllabi stressing (for instance) ethics and social and political philosophy, and others stressing metaphysics and epistemology. Moreover, some syllabi place less emphasis on philosophical problems and more emphasis on the history of philosophy, following, as it were, the chronological development of philosophy from the pre-Socratics onward.

Teachers of the OAC Philosophy have displayed great ingenuity in teaching the course, using pedagogical tools that include films (e.g., «The Matrix,» «Star Trek»), videos (e.g., BBC's «Men of Ideas,» NFB's «To Be»), short stories (e.g., Sartre's «The Wall»), thought experiments (e.g., Parfit's teletransporter and Star Trek's Holodeck), and newspapers and magazine articles. Some teachers have encouraged students to create their own philosophy magazines using desktop publishing resources; and some have encouraged their students to host philosophy cafes, inviting other classes and even parents to talk philosophy. To date there is no textbook for OAC Philosophy. Teachers have had to draw - somewhat haphazardly - on a variety of sources, including textbooks written for introductory courses at the college and university level. This has not been an ideal solution, not only because of the high cost of these texts, but because the level of many of the university and college introductory texts is too advanced. Two textbook lending libraries have been established by the OSSPP, one at the Philosophy Department of the University of Toronto, and one at the Philosophy Department at York University. A team of writers is currently working on a new textbook with McGraw-Hill Ryerson, to be published in 2002.

THE FUTURE

Philosophy has a bright future in high school in Ontario. With the help of the new association, and the participation of the Philosophy Departments of Ontario colleges and universities, the numbers of students taking the course can be expected to continue to increase. The Grade 11 course especially represents an exciting new development, as the age range of the students will present new pedagogical and curricular challenges.

The OSSPP continues to meet annually with the Committee of Chairs at the Ontario Philosophical Society, reporting back to them about developments and new initiatives. It has advised the Depart-

ments of Philosophy of a variety of initiatives that can be taken to help promote philosophy in high school. These initiatives are focussed on fostering contact between high school philosophers and university philosophers. A number of these initiatives have been successfully realized at York University, the University of Toronto, and Carleton University, among other places. They include: a) designating a member of the Department to act as a high school-university liaison representative, and as the departmental representative for the Ontario Philosophy Teacher's Association; b) providing information about OAC Philosophy in undergraduate philosophy course calendars; c) informing undergraduate philosophy classes of the OAC Philosophy; d) establishing a library of introductory philosophy textbooks, to be made available to local high school philosophy teachers; e) organizing a one or two-day Departmental Open House to which local high school philosophy classes are invited; f) encouraging faculty to give guest lectures to local high school philosophy classes; g) encouraging graduate students and upper-level undergraduate students to give guest lectures to local high school philosophy classes, and establishing a Graduate Assistantship to run this as a teaching practicum; h) notifying local high school philosophy teachers of the availability of faculty for consultation on technical and pedagogical matters; i) establishing a database of local high school philosophy teachers; and j) inviting local high school philosophy teachers to workshops or guest lectures hosted by the department.

In a similar vein, the OSSPP will be meeting at the annual conference of the Canadian Philosophical Association with the newly founded provincial committees - committees whose job it is to explore the possibility of introducing philosophy into high school in other provinces.

CONCLUSION

In the past few pages I have discussed how philosophy has been successfully introduced into the Ontario secondary school curriculum - in spite of the many odds against it. The following recommendations, which summarize some of the developments of the last decade in Ontario, may be of use to teachers in other provinces and states:

- establish a flexible and small working project to encourage liaison between teachers and administrators in secondary schools, colleges, and universities; to work with the Ministry of Education; and to serve as the umbrella organization for those supportive of introducing philosophy into the secondary school curriculum;
- mobilize the Chairs of Departments of Philosophy at universities and colleges in the province or state;
- identify the relevant policy makers in the provincial or state governments' Ministry or Department of Education (e.g., the Curriculum Development Branch);
 - establish a website and electronic bulletin board, and set up links with other education websites;
 - encourage students to form philosophy clubs in high schools; set up a database of teachers and curriculum development experts who are interested in teaching philosophy in high school;
- create a province-wide or state-wide association for high school philosophy teachers; until a province-wide or state-wide association can be formed, host workshop sessions, focus groups, and «bearpit sessions» on

teaching philosophy in high school at the annual conferences or professional development days of other disciplines (e.g. History, English);

- host a conference on teaching philosophy in high school, using Board of Education newsletters, teacher's union newsletters, Board listserves, and general philosophy listserves, to advertise it.

While good organization, strategic long-range planning, and successful lobbying efforts can help introduce philosophy into the secondary school curriculum, in the end it is the students and teachers who must work to insure the success of the course. Without energetic participation and enthusiasm, no amount of organization and lobbying will be effective.

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