Philosophy and Education

Philosophy and Education:
Introducing Philosophy to Young People

Edited by

Jana Mohr Lone and Roberta Israeloff

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“All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth.”
—Aristotle

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INTRODUCTION

PLATO, THE SQUIRE FAMILY FOUNDATION AND RECLAIMING EDUCATION

ROBERTA ISRAELOFF

The Squire Family Foundation began in 2006 during a conversation—between Gary Squire, whom I've known since middle school, and me. Gary studied philosophy, both at Yale and Oxford, before receiving a law degree from Harvard. But his legal career was short-lived; he quickly became involved in historical preservation in Washington DC, and ultimately turned to residential real estate development. As we talked about which of the many worthy causes he wanted his nascent foundation to address, it became clear that philosophy was his first love. In this light, the foundation repays the debt Gary feels he incurred years ago, as a philosophy student.

PLATO, which held its first institute from which this volume sprung in June 2011, also began with a conversation. Two years ago, over a post-conference drink, Jana Mohr Lone and I dreamed about bringing together all those in the US who were interested in and committed to doing philosophy with young students—whether they were already teaching philosophy, either at the pre-college level or at a college or university, or were interested in doing so.

That there's a need for an organization for all those interested in pre-college philosophy is apparent. Until now, the task of interesting young US students in philosophy fell to a small group of academic philosophers, many of whom have been involved for years with the American Philosophical Association's Committee on Pre-college Instruction in Philosophy, who took the initiative and mustered the energy to create their own outreach programs in their communities. At the same time, a few enterprising graduate students created philosophical outreach programs at their universities. And in some schools, philosophically-inclined teachers pioneered and taught courses in their schools, often after mounting lengthy lobbying campaigns. Several centers existed—the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children and the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children, for example—but by and large, most people

worked in isolation, largely unaware of other efforts. PLATO seeks to bring everyone in this field together.

And though its goals may seem modest—creating a forum where teachers can share ideas and resources, meet new colleagues, find more training—I think we're all launched on a task that is anything but modest. I believe that this is the start of an educational reform movement that bucks the tide. Instead of fretting about tests and answers, we're encouraging students to ask questions and to question answers. Instead of telling them what to think, we're asking them to examine *how* they think. Instead of giving teachers scripts to read—which is so demeaning—we want to give teachers the confidence to ask questions to which they may not know the answer. Instead of eliminating recess, we endorse playfulness.

It's not just about creating a philosophy class, launching a club or lunchtime discussion group in a school, or finding enough schools in an area to invite to a regional ethics bowl—though that's where we start. To run the risk of sounding hyperbolic, I think what we're really doing is reclaiming education. We're trying to take it back from those who are inclined to think of education as a commodity, who claim that its products can be quantified, like computer chips, and that its methods can be improved by testing and more testing. Just because running a school involves elements of business—requiring budgets, payrolls, outcomes—doesn't mean that it can be *reduced* to a business, that at heart it is an exchange of one type of service for another. We don't consume books, we devour them, and the metaphors we naturally resort to, in talking about education, involve not balance sheets and accountability, but appetite, relationships and love.

In a recent *New Yorker* review of two books about higher education, Louis Menand wrote (he was speaking about the humanities, but you can substitute philosophy) that we read "these books because they teach you things about the world and yourself that you are unlikely to learn anywhere else." He goes on to say that through the humanities we "acquire the knowledge and skills important for life as an informed citizen, as a reflective and culturally literate human being," and that this material "enlightens and empowers" us, whatever we end up doing. As Thomas Wartenberg said at a conference in 2011, by introducing young students to philosophy—even those in third and fourth grades—we're giving them the opportunity to say to themselves, "Maybe I have a different future than the one everything else in my world seems to intend for me."

I would bet if we took a poll, most of us would report having had teachers who changed us, some of us radically, who put us on a different path. I'm the beneficiary of many of these teachers. What they all had in

common was their passion. Even as a young student, I knew they had something meaty to say, that they loved the subject they were teaching. They seemed immersed in a body of material that seemed both ineffable, and larger than the next test or the semester grade. They were moved by what they were teaching, and they were interested in how this material grabbed us. Classes were transformational because we had an impact on each other. These teachers brought us, to crudely paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, face-to-face with something commensurate with our capacity for wonder.

Teachers change lives. Philosophy teachers can radically change lives. Among the several goals that PLATO espouses, it is, at heart, about cultivating life-changing, world-expanding, opportunity-creating teachers.

We're a small counter-movement, but we're approaching critical mass, we're persistent, and we also have the advantage of being right.

After five years of working with so many visionary philosophers, I feel as if I should be at least halfway to my honorary bachelor's degree in philosophy. But I remain an English teacher at heart, which explains why, in thinking about this subject, my thoughts turn to William Butler Yeats' famous poem, *Among School Children*. It tells the story of a 60-year-old statesman visiting a Montessori school—and it, too, begins with a conversation: "I walk through the long schoolroom questioning." Along the way Yeats mentions and meditates on some famous philosophers. And at the poem's end, eight stanzas later, he's still questioning, famously:

> O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Clearly, it's not just philosophers who philosophize. Some do so in meter and meter. All of us do so as children. The big questions come naturally to us. Why should we put them aside when we begin school? In short, the paths that bring us together this morning vary, but in the end, we're drawn by our compulsion to ask questions, to question answers, and to value education—which also, we all know, begins in wonder.

PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION: A GATEWAY TO INQUIRY

JANA MOHR LONE

Ordinarily when philosophy and education are mentioned together, the speaker or writer is referring to the field of philosophy of education or someone's educational philosophy. They generally are not alluding to the relationship between the discipline of philosophy and K-12 education. This book seeks to illuminate that relationship and to demonstrate the ways in which philosophy can strengthen and deepen pre-college education.

It's sometimes said that children are "natural philosophers." Young people are curious about the mysteries of the human experience and about questions such as the nature of identity, the meaning and purpose of being alive, and whether we can know anything at all. Pre-college philosophy takes as a starting point young people's inherent interest in large questions about the human condition. Whether it's reading picture books that raise philosophical issues with children in elementary school or studying Descartes with high school seniors, philosophical exploration begins with students' inclinations to question the meaning of such concepts as truth, knowledge, identity, fairness, justice, morality, art, and beauty.

How can philosophy contribute to pre-college education? Philosophy is grounded in questioning. The unsettled nature of most philosophical questions means that often it is the question that matters most, and not reaching a final answer. K-12 education does not generally value questions and questioning. When teachers pose questions in classrooms, usually they are not attempting to initiate an inquiry about the question or to demonstrate the value of questioning, but rather are seeking a specific answer from the students. In philosophy, however, questions are central, and they are the gateways to inquiry. Asking good questions is an essential skill for evaluating the flood of information that children face, for gathering what they need to make good decisions, and for conveying the gaps in their understanding of particular topics or situations. The more skilled students becomes at constructing good questions, the more able

they will be to think clearly and competently. And the only way to develop this skill is practice.

Philosophy encourages students to question the assumptions that underlie our thinking and behavior. Engaging in philosophical inquiry trains young people to evaluate claims based on reason and analysis, rather than on unexamined beliefs and prejudice. Because philosophical questions are complex and often can be approached from a broad range of perspectives, they require careful reasoning. Philosophical inquiry thus facilitates student acquisition of some of the tools needed for becoming self-directed learners and learning to think for themselves. The emphasis on questioning and independent thinking, on uncertainty rather than certainty, can enliven classrooms and engage students by involving them in thinking about large important questions that matter to them.

For the most part, although some high school teachers have taught isolated philosophy classes, philosophy has not been part of K-12 education in the U.S. A movement to introduce philosophy into schools, and to reclaim its importance as a core academic subject, has gained ground in recent years. Dozens of programs introducing philosophy into the pre-college curriculum have been started at universities across the country, and more and more teachers are becoming interested in bringing philosophical inquiry into their classrooms.

As part of that movement, a new national organization, PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization), has been formed to advocate for the introduction of philosophy into pre-college classrooms and to create and maintain connections between the education and philosophy communities. In June 2011, the first PLATO Institute was held at Teachers College, Columbia University. The articles in this volume came out of that conference.

Part I of the book examines various issues involved in teaching philosophy to young people at different grade levels, including assessing what teachers need in order to teach philosophy in schools and describing several models for introducing philosophy into schools. Parts II through VI delve into ways to inspire young students to explore specific branches of philosophy—ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, and logic—through literature, thought experiments, and games and activities, as well as traditional philosophy texts. The book's final section considers student assessment and program evaluation, and analyzes the contributions pre-college philosophy can make to education in general.

Teachers and educators—and parents—all want young people to grow up with the skills they need to pursue their own goals and become productive and successful adults. Thinking independently and reasoning

clearly are central to these objectives. The hard thinking that philosophical inquiry demands provides students with some of the analytic skills they need to engage in thoughtful decision-making throughout their lives, and the richness of the questions involved can help young people maintain their awareness of the world as marvelous and mysterious.

PART I

PHILOSOPHICAL SENSITIVITY AND PREPARATION OF K-12 PHILOSOPHY TEACHERS

TEACHING PRE-COLLEGE PHILOSOPHY: THE CULTIVATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL SENSITIVITY

JANA MOHR LONE

Introduction

Over the last several years I've been thinking more seriously about what is required to teach philosophy well. In the fifteen years that I've been involved in pre-college philosophy, the pace of introducing philosophy into schools in the United States has been very slow. Over the last five years, however, there has been growing interest and engagement in the field, with new programs starting at many colleges and universities around the country. In this time, I've had several conversations with people working in the field about whether philosophy could one day be offered in every school in every state.

My excitement about the growing interest in pre-college philosophy is tempered by a concern and a question. My concern is that it is not clear (to me, at least, and I think to many or most people) who is going to teach all of these philosophy classes. My question is: What kind of training is needed to teach philosophy and do it well?

At this point, most of the people involved in this field are either philosophy faculty or graduate students, or high school teachers with backgrounds in philosophy. Most pre-college teachers have had little or no exposure to philosophy because, of course, for the most part, people educated in the US are not introduced to philosophy in any formal way unless they take a philosophy class in college. Although the philosophy faculty and graduate students interested in this field are often passionate about it, only a small minority of professional philosophers is drawn to this work, and those of us who are interested can only teach so many pre-college classes. If pre-college philosophy classes are to be more widely available, then we must look to K-12 teachers.

In this light, my question about what kind of training is needed to teach philosophy becomes a more critical one. A short and incomplete response

is that what teachers need to teach philosophy well varies, depending on the grade level of their students. I believe that more training in philosophy is needed for teachers seeking to teach the subject in upper-level classrooms. High school students, for example, and especially seniors and juniors, are capable of analyzing more complex philosophy questions and engaging in the study of primary texts. Therefore, the philosophy teacher who has been exposed to philosophical texts and trained philosophically is more likely to be successful at introducing philosophy to high school students.

Elementary school teachers, however, also need philosophical training if they are successfully to facilitate philosophy sessions with their students. There have been several recent publications that have suggested that elementary school teachers do not need to know any philosophy to teach it. I disagree. Although introducing philosophy to younger children does not typically involve reading primary philosophical texts, but rather focuses on inspiring conversations among the children about philosophical ideas, nevertheless the teacher leading these discussions must have both a clear sense for how to motivate a philosophical conversation and the ability to recognize the philosophical content of the students' statements and questions. To be able to monitor a philosophical dialogue and support its progress, a pre-college philosophy teacher of any grade must have sufficient training to be able to identify the philosophical substance and assumptions inherent in student remarks and the logical relationships between various students' statements.

It is my view that a foundational skill for teaching philosophy at any level is the development of what I am calling "philosophical sensitivity," which I define as the capacity to engage in identification of and reflection about the larger questions that underlie most of what we think we understand about the world. I have written and spoken elsewhere at greater length about this topic, and my aim here is simply to provide an introduction to the subject.

Theoretical Conception: What is Philosophical Sensitivity?

Philosophical sensitivity involves the development of our ability to identify and analyze fundamental questions about the human condition. My conception of this perceptual capacity is based in part on Aristotle's idea of an innate faculty that we can develop over time and with training. Aristotle postulated a capacity for *moral* perception which, when cultivated, gradually enables us to perceive almost instinctively the

important features of complex ethical situations. These perceptual skills, nurtured through training and experience, help us to foster a more nuanced ability to see aspects of moral problems that are not apparent to others who have not developed this capacity.

Similarly, philosophical sensitivity is a perceptual capacity that involves awareness of the unsettled questions that haunt virtually every aspect of our lives. What makes me myself? Do I have free will? What, if anything, is the meaning of life? This capacity, when cultivated, allows us to discern the philosophically significant aspects of ordinary experience by identifying assumptions or unsettled questions that underlie situations. For example, a student might wonder whether it's fair that children under age 18 don't get to vote in national elections. Philosophical sensitivity helps a teacher notice that several philosophical questions are imbedded here: "What is fairness?" "What does fairness require?" "Is it always unfair to discriminate against particular groups?" "What is a child?" "What kinds of capacities are necessary to make good choices?" We exhibit philosophical sensitivity when we are able to identify and then explore the philosophical puzzles inherent in most situations; and as we utilize this capacity, it deepens. In other words, the more we notice and examine the philosophical features of our experiences, the more philosophically aware we become.

How does one identify a philosophical question? Unsurprisingly, this is not an uncontroversial question among philosophers. It's difficult to define the margins of philosophical questions without omitting something that should be included or including questions that we agree are not philosophical. However, one way to identify at least roughly when something is *not* a question of philosophy is to ask if it's possible to settle it by reference to empirical facts. If so, it's probably not a philosophical question, no matter how difficult it may be to answer. Of course, there are many hybrid questions, such as, for example, "What is the mind?" or "What does it mean to be alive?" that involve both philosophy and science, and for which there are no clear ways to delineate the borders for what's philosophical and what's not. In general, though, philosophical questions are not fully answered with facts about the world, and they tend to be questions that seem likely to be perennially unsettled.

What makes a question philosophical is not delineated by subject matter—there are no limits to the questions that can inspire philosophical exploration. Although there are standard kinds of questions that are taught in, say, college introductory philosophy classes, such questions are a small subset of those that can lead to philosophical exploration. It is the response to a question that often determines whether philosophical inquiry follows.

A philosophical exchange can be triggered by an apparently simple question, if the conversation that develops is a deeply questioning one. Although some questions are more likely to lead to an inquiry than others, philosophical questions can be asked about almost every facet of life. What characterizes philosophical inquiry is not its content, but the approach with which a question is being explored.

Much of what we think, do and say rests on unexamined assumptions that can be uncovered through philosophical scrutiny. Such scrutiny generally examines the meaning of a concept or idea, suggesting questions that are not likely to be answered in any final way. This doesn't mean, however, that philosophical questions are questions without answers. Often students (and teachers) who are not trained philosophically understand philosophy as involving "questions that have no answers," and assume that discussions about these questions simply involve students stating their opinions. However, there's a clear distinction between a question that's *unanswerable* and a question that's *contestable*. An unanswerable question is one with no answers: "What does a married bachelor look like?" Philosophical questions are neither unanswerable nor just a matter of opinion. There *are* answers to them; they are just not incontestable, as once settled and final answers become clear the questions cease to be philosophical.

Although philosophical sensitivity involves reflection about large and often abstract questions, for the most part these questions are raised in very specific ways. Our own unique experiences give us a particular philosophical perspective, and what we notice in the philosophical universe depends on that perspective. Philosophical sensitivity involves an awareness of the complex questions raised by the most ordinary aspects of everyday experience; it allows us to see (as Bertrand Russell put it) "familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect." This demands acute attentiveness to the ways in which the individual details of situations give rise to certain philosophical questions. Thinking about such questions generally leads to recognizing related questions, so that the more we examine this dimension of experience the more these kinds of questions leap out at us in everyday life. As philosophical sensitivity is nurtured over time, it becomes almost second nature.

Cultivating Philosophical Sensitivity

Cultivating philosophical sensitivity involves training our perceptual capacities and, in particular, our skills at noticing the philosophical implications and assumptions contained in almost all speech and behavior.

As we engage in philosophical reflection and are trained to see the philosophical features of experience, we come to understand the world differently. Our education and experience in philosophical questioning and deliberation enable us to notice and draw out aspects of experience that would otherwise remain elusive to us.

Training in philosophical sensitivity doesn't consist in learning a set of rules for when philosophical questions arise and how to address them. In another parallel with Aristotle's description of moral perception, no decision procedure exists to govern how to identify and grapple with philosophical questions. As stated earlier, there is no list of all possible philosophical questions. However, basic knowledge about the core areas of philosophy—epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, aesthetics and the history of philosophy—is helpful for recognizing the philosophical content of various situations. A philosophically sensitive person is one who is able to view a circumstance or set of ideas and recognize the philosophical facets involved. In order to be able to do this, some background in philosophy is important.

Probably the best initial way to develop one's capacity for philosophical sensitivity is to gain experience participating in a group in which philosophical questions are identified and explored in a collaborative community, whether in a college classroom or some other elsewhere. For example, teachers can attend an intensive weekend training program during which they are introduced to the materials, discussions and conceptual methods relevant to teaching pre-college philosophy. They can then begin trying out philosophy sessions in their classrooms and, in ideal situations, participate in ongoing professional learning communities with trained philosophers. Another promising model is the philosopher-in-residence program, in which trained philosophers both facilitate classroom philosophy classes and provide a philosophical context in which school-wide teacher training and support can be conducted. Partnerships between philosophy and education departments, whereby philosophy majors take education courses and education majors are introduced to philosophy, is another possibility, as is the creation of online communities of teachers and philosophers where they can collaborate on theories and methods.

Most pre-college philosophy sessions, especially for younger students, are arenas for discussing philosophical questions, not lessons about what historical and contemporary philosophers have to say about these questions. That is, we engage young people in *doing* philosophy, rather than studying it. Instead of (or in addition to) reading the great philosophers and analyzing their arguments, young people explore in structured, collaborative classroom discussions the questions that puzzle them.

My view is that philosophically sensitive teachers can successfully facilitate such pre-college philosophy discussions without earning degrees or spending years of study in philosophy. In order to do so, two main pedagogical skills are essential: (1) the ability initially to motivate or inspire a philosophical discussion, and (2) a facility for shaping its progress.

What Makes a Discussion Philosophical?

A philosophical discussion involves the following three elements: (1) examination of an abstract, general question that cannot be answered empirically; (2) arguments given to support the views offered; and (3) a progression or development of either the meaning of the idea(s) being explored or the participants' understanding of a concept or concepts.

To be able to inspire such a discussion, a teacher must be able to identify the philosophical content in students' questions and comments, and to support the students' efforts to engage in mutual reflection about the questions that most engage them. One method for doing this is to construct what is sometimes called a community of philosophical inquiry (CPI), in which the teacher's role is to guide students in a dialogue about philosophical issues or concepts generated and explored by the group.

There has been a great deal written about the formation of a CPI, but I want just to articulate what I see as four key features of a CPI:

1. The group is engaged in a structured, collaborative inquiry aimed at constructing meaning and acquiring understanding through the examination of philosophical questions or concepts of interest to the participants;
2. There is a consensus of what historically has been called "epistemological modesty," an acknowledgement that all members of the group, including the teacher, are fallible, and therefore hold views that could end up being mistaken;
3. The teacher demonstrates a reticence about advocating his or her own philosophical views, and models a comfort with uncertainty since there are no final and agreed-upon answers to most of the questions being explored by the CPI; and
4. Participants refrain from using technical philosophical language or referring to the work of professional philosophers to construct their arguments. This encourages the group to focus on exploring the questions themselves and not the past or current history of the subject among philosophers.

The teacher guides the CPI without attempting to control it, a delicate balance between helping students achieve philosophical clarity and depth

and refraining from imposing on the conversation the teacher's own preferences for subject matter. Being able to discern which issues are philosophical and which are not is particularly important for ensuring the philosophical integrity of the CPI; that is, that it principally engenders *philosophical* conversations and not something else.

In any pre-college philosophy session there will be periods of time when the conversation turns away from the philosophical into examples from science, say, or stories about personal experience. The point is not to prohibit such examples or stories, as they can be useful in the context of exploring a particular issue of philosophy, but to explore only those relevant to the conversation. The aim is to ensure that the discussion is *primarily* philosophical, as opposed to an opinion gathering, group therapy or other kind of exercise.

Successful philosophy teachers have their own individual approaches for motivating this kind of philosophical community, but all are enthusiastic about philosophical inquiry, recognize where particular conversations might be headed, see critical junctures where the posing of a provocative question might motivate the discussion, and help students define clearly and examine carefully the questions they wish to explore.

Progress in Philosophical Inquiry

The second practical skill a pre-college philosophy teacher needs is competence at shaping the progress of a philosophical conversation, which ultimately should proceed in a forward movement. This doesn't mean that the discussion won't loop back and forth, touching several conceptual issues and coming back to earlier questions, rather than developing in a straight line. However, there should be some forward progress—at the very least, a better understanding of what the participants in the conversation think, greater conceptual clarity, identification of key assumptions, and/or appreciation of alternative ways of viewing the subject.

Two related proficiencies are essential here. The teacher must be able to listen carefully to, and recognize the assumptions underlying, what's being said, and to articulate connections and distinctions among the views offered by the students.

Shaping the progress of a philosophical conversation also involves recognizing when it's going in circles and not moving forward in any meaningful way. At this point the teacher might consider what other ideas have emerged during the conversation and gauge whether the participants are interested in moving on to a new topic. Especially because philosophical conversations tend to end without a final resolution of the

question being examined, it's important that the teacher help the group feel some sense of accomplishment at the end of a philosophy session by pointing out the progress that's been made.

Why Philosophical Sensitivity?

Philosophical sensitivity is important, it seems to me, because it is at the heart of the whole enterprise of bringing philosophy into the lives of young people and helping them to learn to think well and trust their own questions. One of the primary tasks of growing up is making sense of the world and one's place in it. To do this effectively requires an ability to take control over one's life, and this demands an ability to think effectively and to ask good questions. Thinking and questioning are central to philosophy. Because philosophical issues are complex, they demand rigorous and careful reasoning. Because they are unsettled, they inspire the formulation of clear and articulate questions.

Each year my colleague David Shapiro and I teach an undergraduate class on philosophy for children, in which we use children's books, games, and other activities to explore a wide range of philosophical questions. For many of our students, it's their first introduction to philosophy, and for virtually all of them, it's their first experience examining philosophical topics through children's literature. They visit the Seattle-area K-12 classes we teach, and they often comment on the way in which the children's discussions are quite similar to the ones we have in our UW class. One college senior recently wrote to us:

> The thing that meant most to me, the most valuable lesson I learned, came from visiting a session with a group of elementary students. I was really amazed at how well these children were able to discuss with each other. They came up with fascinating questions and well thought out responses; ones that were similar to the ideas that would be presented in our classroom. After that session I found new value and respect for a child's intellect. I work with children so I know they are quite intelligent but I never really imagined holding a philosophical conversation with one.

Philosophical conversations with children engender respect for children's ideas and perspectives, and allow adults to engage with children in an endeavor that involves *thinking together*. This is quite different from the traditional teacher-learner model: here the teacher is no longer the expert, but rather a co-inquirer who seeks *with* his or her students to explore philosophical questions.