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PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL CLASSROOMS

Robert Laird *

The Philosophy for Children programme was developed during the 1970s and 1980s to address the low level of thinking skills exhibited by university and high school students in the United States. A programme of studies in philosophy for children from grade one upwards was based on eight novels with accompanying instructional manuals to assist the teacher in extracting the philosophical issues from the novels as children choose them. This programme is relevant and appropriate for use as part of the English curriculum in a remote Aboriginal school in Australia: whether the school has a bilingual or bicultural program in place or not, Philosophy for Children is fitting as it makes thinking skills explicit. Basing it on a concept of a community of inquiry is very supportive to people from a non-English speaking background. The programme of Philosophy for Children brings in subjects from all curriculum areas, thus encouraging the recently supported integrated approach, but is particularly useful for language learning and understanding.

This paper will outline how the program works, and how it fits into the new Northern Territory English curriculum (and many others) and how it enhances Aboriginal children's understanding of European language and culture, and hence improves their options for the future. The appropriateness of the Philosophy for Children programme in this context will be demonstrated by reference to the implementation of the programme in Barunga in 1991/

* Robert Laird is a Teacher at the Barunga Community Education centre and is currently undertaking a Masters of Education at the Northern Territory University .

Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Education

It is argued that education in remote Aboriginal communities has either been neglected or inappropriate in the past. It is clear that the standards achieved in conventional western terms, such as through the Primary Assessment Program testing, achievement levels are low. One of the main factors that much theorising and research has centred upon is that remote Aboriginal schools are at the hub of a unique cross-cultural situation. The fifty thousand year old Aboriginal culture sends its sons and daughters into western schools. Western schools are the instrumental products of the Reformation (Lipman, 1988:12) and industrial revolution. In the late twentieth century schools have come to be seen as training grounds for a better world; and education as an investment in the future. Successful passage through school is the passport to a more open future for young Aboriginal people too. At issue still, however, are the components of the training for the bright, open future. There is much discussion about the curriculum in remote Aboriginal schools. Whether these be two-way, bilingual, or English only ("ESL") the question of what, and perhaps more importantly, how to teach in the western domain remains contentious.

There is a school of thought which suggests that Aboriginal students should be taught about western ways (eg, Maths: Graham, 1984; Science: Harris, J., 1978) using Aboriginal forms such as introducing sticks, leaves and beads rather than Cuisenaire rods and blocks. Using familiar forms from their known world, however, runs the risk of conceptual interference. Treating a fish as an object to count rather than a totem to paint, or as a primary source of food is going to do more to destroy Aboriginal culture than TVs ever have. In the concluding decade of the twentieth century choice is available to remote Aboriginal communities about how much they want to interact with western ways, but that choice is only available if there is the information on which to base the decisions. "Anangu need general information about many subjects in these days of rapid social change." (Capp, 1988:125) This is the other school of thought on what is appropriate for the western domain: introducing western concepts to Aboriginal children in their own explicit context, for example showing how and why western ideas of biology are formed, or maths, or music. Capp suggests that western culture needs to be demystified (1988:125-6). It is not only the content of the western domain that needs to be made more explicit, it is the way of thinking. That way of thinking needs to be taught slowly and explicitly in the western domain of remote Aboriginal schools.

The Philosophy for Children programme offers an opportunity to do precisely that: it explores thought as the basis of meaning and hence language (NT Education Department, 1990). The programme employs the same method throughout a series of novels and attempts to create a reading, reasoning language arts programme. It encourages continuity between reading and conversation and writing. It presents the materials to be mastered in the form of a unified experience. It stresses meaning rather than form. It links the child's experience with the literary experience of humankind. It should stimulate thinking. It should also help children to make better use of the more familiar words, the problematic ones of critical importance to our language: if, but, and, all, no and like. (Lipman and Sharp, 1982: i-iii)

The new Northern Territory Department of Education English curriculum for transition to year ten (1990) expresses and attempts to address some of the central issues of language learning and use. Among its "Central Understandings and Beliefs" the curriculum document lists:

- * Language is the primary way in which meaning is made of human experience.
- * Language is dynamic in that it changes over time and according to the context in which it is used.
- * Language is central to people's experience, understanding and culture.
- * Language serves a wide range of social and cultural purposes.
- * Language is inextricably linked with thought and therefore since thought is central to learning, language plays a central role in learning. (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1990)

By examining the cultural and philosophical bases of our language, the Philosophy for Children programme provides the methods for teaching language in the meaningful way promoted by the new curriculum. It is of benefit of all children, but especially for children from different, and in the case of Aboriginal children, antithetical (Harris, 1990 a: 9), language and cultural heritages.

Central to the Philosophy for Children programme are the same ideas which inform the new English curriculum:

All thinking is linguistically and culturally conditioned. Thinking in English means thinking in conceptual ways that are possible in the language. To think in a language is to think in the culture of that language. Both students who learn English as their first language and those who learn it as a second need to be aware of the cultural heritage (broadly interpreted) in it. (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1990)

To these ends, Philosophy for Children promotes discussion and examination of ideas, assumptions and hidden meanings in our language. It aims to make explicit the implicit (see Harris, 1990 b:14) for Aboriginal children, and others from non-western cultural heritages, this can be the key to unlocking the mysteries of western schooling and society, and help them to operate successfully in these foreign contexts.

Knowledge is always inescapably contingent, open to revision, and a matter of practical judgement, as it is inseparable from the language and activities of particular communities of human beings. The main fields of philosophy that Lipman and Sharp (1986:4) suggest will strengthen education are epistemology, logic, metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics. In the Philosophy for Children programme, the children's books are novel like works of fiction, written simply and with no reference to the names and technical terminology that professional or advanced philosophers employ. Teachers are the leaders of a community of inquiry, and as such need to have some familiarity with the terms, but the handbooks give an introduction and an outline of ideas and exercises with which the teacher needs to be familiar. Needless to say, the children are not the only learners in a programme of this sort.

Each paragraph of the novels provides ample lures to attract children's attention and wonder. It is when this happens that the teacher needs to be ready with an appropriate exercise to illuminate and clarify the issue at hand. Through these methods the Philosophy for Children programme attempts to cultivate in children the disposition to engage in mental acts,

verbal acts, reasoning and enquiry. (Lipman & Sharp, 1986:5) This is how **Kio and Gus** and the other books in the series differ from other novels for children. It presents people discussing the true, the beautiful and the good, expounding their views as to what is precious and excellent and perfect, and attempting to find reasons with which to justify their beliefs. In other words, the book provides a model or scaffold (Gray, 1990:124) of children thinking about thinking, talking, and other philosophical issues.

One of the aims of the Philosophy for Children programme is that a community of inquiry develops (Sharp, n.d; passim). All the participants, including the leader-teacher, have wondering minds that think about the everyday knowledge around them. There are hundreds of exercises in the Philosophy for Children programme and many score of ideas which relate to philosophical concepts. The level of discussion is meant to begin from the participants, inspired by the literature base. (Examples of this will be given later.) For each age level and broad area of philosophy (eg: philosophy of science, language, ethics and so on) there is a particular novel. The novels are self-contained. The manual accompanying each novel provides ready-made exercises to each page to pursue discussion, if that point has created interest among the students.

The instructional manual to accompany **Kio and Gus** is laid out sequentially into chapters, and each chapter is divided into a number of episodes, to match the sequence of the novel. There can be as many as ten leading ideas introduced during an episode, which the manual discusses in some detail, before giving exercises which are referenced to particular lines/words in the novel. The exercises are designed to strengthen skills. Discussion plans are similarly referenced and designed to explore and clarify concepts. The following short extract should form an example of how the programme works. The numbers in parentheses are simply line numbers.

- (1) "Kio," Gus says to me, "Where's Roger?"
- (2) Roger is my cat.
- (3) "I don't know," I say. "He's probably hiding
- (4) Somewhere"

The manual suggests many activities from these few lines of Kio and Gus (Lipman, 1989:3). In the first line is the leading idea of who is doing the talking, and the accompanying idea of who is talking and can two people tell the one story. The second line can introduce the leading idea of what does "my" mean, with accompanying exercises and discussion plans on the concept of ownership. Also in the second line the idea of "cats" can be introduced, with accompanying exercises and discussions on the cat family, and thinking about the cat in poetry and literature. These lines and the rest of the page can be used to introduce the idea of speaking in the first person, and has exercises on first person, second person, and third person narratives and distinguishing between them. **The third line** could be used to introduce the leading idea of the concept of probability: what do we mean by "probably"? The passage also invites discussion on people's relationships with and conceptualisation of animals, and pets. This short example shows how wide-ranging and varied the possibilities for discussion and learning are from the Philosophy for Children novels. The limits of learning are set by the students themselves, who are required to indicate the areas they want to discuss.

There is much research into the cultural differences of cognitive styles which suggests that Aboriginal children have a much more co-operative cognitive style than western children. A possible criticism of the Philosophy for Children programme in Aboriginal school would be that the cognitive style encouraged by the programme would either (a) exclude Aboriginal children due to the encouragement of individual expression in the community of enquiry; or (b) will corrupt Aboriginal cognitive style by implanting the western approach inherent in the program. During the teaching of **Kio and Gus** to the senior primary class at Barunga (12 September 1991) children were expressing thoughts individually and voluntarily, which suggests that Aboriginal students are not excluded from such activities. The fear remains that the western cognitive style inherent in philosophy will swamp and indeed usurp Aboriginal cognitive style. It is here that the skill of the teacher in presentation comes in. The whole program needs to be presented as a western role game that examines one important aspect of the western world: thought and knowledge. The exercises will be pursued by the children for perhaps one hour in total each week. That sort of exposure to western philosophy is hardly likely to change the thought process of a child who lived in an

Aboriginal community using their own cultural thought processes for perhaps one hundred and ten hours each week. Children should already be aware of the cultural split between home and school, and in two-way and bilingual schools, the difference between the western and Aboriginal domain in their classroom. The Philosophy for Children program should help to make these differences more explicit, by helping the children understand the underpinnings of western language and culture.

The Philosophy for Children programme offers children a rich, integrated setting in which to learn about language. This opportunity is emphasised for all students, not just those from a non-English speaking background (Flores et al, 1991:373). However Gray points out (1990:110) that teachers need to encourage socially constructed learning for Aboriginal students, as the difference between their background and the background of an English speaker is that the Aboriginal student will not have the opportunity for social construction of English contexts outside school. The Philosophy for Children programme provides these contexts using literature as a base. Wittgenstein was one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century. His notion of language as a game has much to recommend it when applied to learning of western philosophy by Aboriginal students. (Pellegrini, 1991:385) Further to Gray's emphasis on providing a context for language learning is the importance of learning the rules of the game. By reading the novels as a community of enquiry a class will have practice in the simple rules of English, but they shall also enter deeper the more hidden levels which are the rules not just of English language but also of western thought (since the supremacy of rationality during the Enlightenment.) Not only is the curriculum being covered more fully by dealing with logic (hence covering inductive and deductive logical thought) but more importantly, Aboriginal children will be discovering/learning the rules of the game, the game of western culture and society. Classroom reading and writing exercises could be described as practising the game itself, and when children attain mastery of reading/writing, it could be said that they have a high level of skills or expertise in playing the English game. To gain a deeper understanding, and hence play better, and possibly to coach, the participants need to know the rules of the game. They need to be known, understood and used. The beauty of Wittgenstein's analogy is that it allows that once the game is over the participants, the Aboriginal children, can go home or play another game, both of which require different rules.

Implementation at Barunga

In the programme at Barunga, the NT Philosopher-in-Residence, Clive Lindop, visited one day each week during August/September 1991. A room was arranged in the mornings with a circle of chairs (to encourage questioning/sharing/contradiction) with a cassette recorder in the centre. Each group consisted of eight to ten children, a teacher, and Clive. Clive acted as leader of the community in the first session. Teachers were workshopped on techniques, ideas and exercises after school, and invited to try an exercise the following week. As the weeks progressed, the teacher, with increasing confidence, took a more prominent role in leading the discussion.

Problems and comments

- Using a special purpose room was an excellent idea. All the facilities were there: blackboards, a class set of novels and separation from usual/other school business
- The cassette recorder was distracting to the children who tried to make the visible VU meter move by drumming chairs, squeaking feet and voices.
- The circle of chairs enabled the discussion leader to encourage contribution by asking one student's opinion and then asking the student opposite whether they agreed or not.
- As a result of the active inservice focus there were several difficulties: having a new face in the school encouraged the children to talk so it is difficult to separate the effect of the programme from its novelty status without prolonging the current programme and initiating the programme anew with different classes, known to the teachers.

The effects

The children certainly did talk, however, about things not usually discussed in English. Such philosophical heights as where names of things and people come from and what they are for; comparing parts, wholes and different kinds as well as degrees, and examining relationships, were attained.

Interest waned as the novelty wore off, but this was principally as they realised that it was hard work to think so thoroughly; "bust brains" is the phrase these children used to describe this effect. One girl in Sydney said, "You learn to think deeply. It's very hard." (Liverani,1991:8)

All the children talked more. Some children talked in a formal oral situation who had previously only felt comfortable talking in English in a one-to-one situation. Children who had previous skills in English and the formal oral situation were able to explore the ideas presented, generate more discussion and suggested that they, too, were "busting their brains."

The improvement in oral skills and confidence carried over into the general classroom, and the children's use of standard Australian English improved noticeably with their increased confidence.

Conclusion

The new English curriculum makes explicit that learning a language is to learn a way of thinking. It is that way of thinking that is called "cultural baggage." When Aboriginal people want to unlock the secrets of English, it is the thinking they are after. The Philosophy for Children programme is a teaching resource that can be employed by the experienced teacher in the western domain of an Aboriginal school. The use of the programme will assist the children in unlocking the doors of English thought. It will make them better, stronger thinkers in English, and allow access to the secrets of future interaction.

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