FORUM
Volume 62, Number 1, 2020
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2020.62.1.69

The Philosophy for Children Pedagogy in a University-Based Initial Teacher Education Course: a case study of a 'disruptive' pedagogy

FUFY DEMISSIE

ABSTRACT The fundamental aims and outcomes of higher education are increasingly at odds with the accountability and performative agenda in higher education. Pedagogical decisions are often taken with one eye on what students 'want' rather than what they 'need'. In this article, the author shows how she framed her pedagogical approach in terms of what students 'need' rather than just what they 'want'. The author outlines how she adapted Philosophy for Children, an inquiry-based dialogic pedagogy, to the higher education context, and why, despite the challenges of 'data-driven' practices, she continues to see it as a necessary pedagogy for higher education.

Introduction

I began my career as an early years teacher before I became a teacher educator at a university. When I started teaching at university, my expectation was of a lively community of students enquiring and discussing key ideas in their subject and/or the materials they had read. In reality, however, university felt very much like a school classroom because my students were mostly passive and rarely expressed their views or opinions. I became increasingly curious about why they were so reluctant to engage in seminar discussions. At the same time, I came across a BBC documentary about Philosophy for Children (P4C) – *Socrates for Six-year-olds* (Lipman et al, 1990) – which showed children as young as six engaging in thoughtful and meaningful discussions and displaying sophisticated thinking capacities. These two events were the catalyst for my ongoing professional interest in P4C's potential to reinvigorate the dynamics of

classroom discussion and improve my students' capacities to think and reason collaboratively about the 'big ideas' and issues in teacher education.

Issues in Discussion-Based Learning

Learning through discussion is at the heart of authentic and meaningful learning. It is a learning process where 'knowledge is co-constructed ... ideas can be refined and clarified ... and contributions refer to and build upon what has gone on before ... [to] advance the collective understanding' (Wells [1999], quoted in Skidmore & Murakami, 2016, p. 101). This enriched understanding is a product of open-mindedness, questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence and making reasonable judgements (Barnett, 1990; Nixon, 2012). Discussion-based learning is equally valuable to teacher education students because these skills and dispositions affect teacher quality. Effective teachers critically reflect on and evaluate teaching strategies, question the reliability and applicability of research findings, and make judgements about the implications for practice (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Outside the academic context, these skills and dispositions give teachers effective ways to 'distinguish the authentic from the phony', 'the profound from the superficial' and the 'justified from the unwarranted' (Lipman, 2003, p. 273). Thus, high-quality discussion-based learning opportunities are valuable because they nurture the skills and attitudes that foster meaningful learning and effective teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

The evidence, nonetheless, suggests that student engagement and participation in seminars is a problem. Students are uncertain about the value and place of discussions, and/or the expectations of their own and tutors' roles affect participation (Van Der Meer, 2012). Furthermore, they also report concerns about how to engage in seminars (Fejes et al, 2005), and anxiety about expressing their opinions and managing the challenges of group dynamics (Jacques, 2000; Dawson & Evans, 2003). Additionally, Engin's (2016) study identified a lack of confidence in language, knowledge and expectations of 'talk rules' as key factors in linguistic students' uncertainties during classroom discussions, whilst Wade's (1994) study involving student teachers highlighted insecurities about contributing to discussions. The reason, according to some, is students' lack of preparation (Rocca, 2010), whilst others cite social and emotional (Gunn, 2007) and students' prior schooling experiences. In the latter case, for example, studies have highlighted the influence of traditional teacher-centred pedagogies in school on what students expect at university, which can result in student uncertainty about what and how they are learning, and the expectations of their own and tutors' roles (Meer, 2012).

Teaching in Higher Education

As a lecturer in higher education, committed to the transformative potential of higher education, I was concerned that my students were missing out on this

valuable learning opportunity – that is, by staying silent, they were missing out on the valuable outcomes (such as communication, critical evaluation and open-mindedness) of discussion-based learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2010). As a teacher educator, I was also concerned about how the increasing focus on school-based learning and burdensome performativity and accountability pressures (Department for Education, 2011) was limiting time and space for collaborative critical reflection about theory and practice – in other words, the chance to engage in inquiry-based approaches that 'connect theory to practice' and 'empower teachers with greater understanding of complex situations rather than to control them with simplistic formulas or cookie-cutter routines for teaching' (Darling-Hammond, 2000 p. 170). I therefore decided to trial the school-based P4C pedagogy in a higher education context.

The P4C Methodology

P4C (sometimes called a 'community of enquiry' outside school contexts) is an enquiry-based dialogical and democratic pedagogy that aims to improve critical thinking, reasoning and judgements. Matthew Lipman devised this thinking programme for schoolchildren because he was dissatisfied with the quality of his students' thinking at university. He argued that philosophy was equally relevant to non-philosophers, including children, and challenged the idea that only philosophers can do philosophy or that children are incapable of reasoning. His ideas were strongly influenced by John Dewey's notion of a community of enquiry as a space where individuals are open-minded and respectful, but also ready to question and challenge each other in the pursuit of 'truth' (Lipman, 2003).

The methodology reflects the principles of inquiry, dialogue, and critical, creative, collaborative and caring thinking (the 4Cs) – that is, the teacher/facilitator's role and P4C's structure convey these principles. After getting participants to sit in a circle (without any desks in front of them), the facilitator and students establish and agree on the behaviour rules for the dialogue. These often include being respectful, listening and building on each other's ideas (see SAPERE, 2010):

1. To establish a caring and collaborative community ethos, participants sit in a circle, agree the ground rules for the enquiry and take part in ice-breaker type activities.
2. The presentation of stimuli: to provoke interest and motivation.
3. Generating questions: to encourage pupils' curiosity.
4. Voting for a question: to extend the democratic ideals and give ownership to pupils.
5. Airing questions: to value each question.
6. First thoughts: to share first ideas about the question.
7. Building: to build on each other's ideas.

8. Last thoughts: to reflect on the dialogue and the 4Cs – for example: Did we listen to each other? Did we build on each other's ideas? Do we question assumptions?

Stimuli

A variety of stimuli are used to create a provocation for the dialogue. In the original P4C programme, Lipman wrote a series of children's books such as Pixie and Lisa. The characters in the stories encountered puzzling and problematic scenarios, which they attempted to resolve through reasoning. This provided an opportunity for the pupils to question and interrogate the characters' motives, assumptions and reasoning. These series of books were the standard 'curriculum' of P4C for many years, and they were even translated into other languages.

More recently, however, facilitators have used films, photographs, artefacts and storybooks as a starting point for inquiry and discussion. The best stimuli often contain big ideas or concepts that are contestable. Examples of stimuli/provocations can include: a story (for example, Harry Potter) that contains dilemmas and concepts such as good, bad, loyalty, love, revenge, etc.; a photograph or image of environmental damage; or a news video about a demonstration or protest. After a stimulus is presented, the participants discuss it – for example, what they liked or did not like about it, and the ideas it made them think about – before going on in groups to formulate a 'discussible' question. This is followed by a vote to choose the most popular question and for participants to share their first thoughts about the question. In the building stage, they are encouraged to build on each other's ideas by questioning and thinking creatively, critically, collaboratively and caringly.

What Is the Philosophical Aspect of P4C?

The 'P' in P4C highlights two important aspects of P4C. It refers to *what* we think or talk about and *how* we think about it. What we talk about in P4C generally involves philosophical concepts such as 'justice' or 'equality'. Philosophical concepts are common to our experiences, but they are also important in our lives and contestable (SAPERE, 2010). For instance, even for very young children, concepts such as 'friendship' are important and relevant. The other dimension of philosophy relates to how we think about these philosophical concepts. When thinking philosophically, we clarify definitions, give reasons for what we think, are prepared to question our own and others' assumptions, and evaluate the quality of our thinking. Thus, individuals can make progress in terms of their appreciation of alternative conceptions of 'friendship' and ability to reason and justify their own and other's views. Even if there is no agreed 'answer' to the question, students can still progress in their ability to ask questions, evaluate opinions, recognise assumptions and listen to others' perspectives.

Critical, Creative, Collaborative and Caring Thinking

In his book *Thinking in Education*, Lipman (2003) critiques educational movements that only focus on critical thinking. He argues that critical thinking on its own is 'narrow and skimpy' and lacks creative thinking that would engage 'imaginative thinking', which helps us to consider alternative perspectives and implications (Lipman, 2003, p. 5). Instead, fruitful dialogue should also include caring thinking. Caring thinking is driven by emotions because, without emotions, 'thinking would be flat and uninteresting' (Lipman et al, 1980, p. 260). But caring thinking involves two senses: thinking/caring not only about the subject matter, but also about the quality of our reasoning, such as being careful about the distinctions we make, the reasons we give and the assumptions behind those reasons. Sharpe takes this further. For her, developing caring thinking is fundamental for a community of inquiry because the practice of these attitudes (see Table I) creates the ideal conditions for more effective and reasonable thinking (Sharpe, 2004).

Caring thinkers	**Critical thinkers**
think about what is said *listen to others carefully* *imagine how others feel* *do not interrupt* *wait one's turn*	*ask 'big idea' questions* *test ideas* *give good reasons* *ask for reasons* *look for evidence* *suggest conclusions*
Collaborative thinkers *build on ideas* *speak to each other* *be friendly and helpful* *share experiences* *work together*	**Creative thinkers** *make connections* *think of new ideas* *explore possibilities* *compare things* *suggest alternatives*

Table I. The 4Cs adapted from the SAPERE website (https://www.sapere.org.uk/).

More recently, the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE, 2010) has included a fourth 'C' (collaborative), to emphasise the idea of building on each other's ideas as a key component of dialogue and deliberation. Thus, the 4Cs are now known as the underpinning foundation of a community of enquiry. Individuals learn how to be critical and creative, but in a caring and collaborative context.

The Role of the Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is closely connected to the 4Cs. For example, by getting participants to sit in a circle, establishing and monitoring the ground rules, and giving participants ownership of the discussion, the facilitator creates the ideal conditions for caring and collaborative thinking, dialogue and discussion. Having established these conditions, the facilitator's other role is to model and promote critical and creative thinking. This includes not only thinking moves such as clarifying and summarising, but also highlighting 'contestable concepts', adopting and modelling an open and curious attitude, and encouraging students to employ critical (asking and giving reasons, justifying, questioning assumptions) and creative (making connections) thinking in addressing the question. The facilitator promotes this through interventions such as 'How do we know that?' or 'Is that the best reason we can find?' in order to encourage productive inquiry and dialogue.

An Example from Practice

In the first instance, I decided to trial the P4C methodology with a group of final-year students, who showed much improved participation, engagement and motivation in seminar discussions.

After a warm-up activity and reminder of the ground rules (Steps 1 and 2), a group of teacher education students was presented with a storybook entitled *I Want My Hat Back*, by Jon Klassen (Step 3). It is a story about a rabbit who steals a bear's hat but lies about it, and then ends up getting eaten by the bear – we assume in revenge.

After generating several questions (Step 4), the majority voted for the following: 'Is it OK to show lying in children's books?' (Step 5). First thoughts were shared (Step 6), and a dialogue (Step 7), which was supported by the following interventions from the facilitator:

- 'OK' is a loaded word. What do we mean by 'Is it OK'? Is it legal? Is it morally acceptable? Is it developmentally acceptable? Is it harmful? Is it controversial?
- An important concept here is the concept of honesty and truth. What does 'lying' mean? Is there an agreed definition of 'lying'? What counts as lying? Are white lies the same as, for example, lying about your birthday?
- Should schools always, sometimes or never avoid presenting issues such as 'lying' to children?
- Could someone argue that it is teachers' or schools' responsibility to help children make sense of moral issues, articulate their thoughts, and analyse when and how 'lying' might come up in their everyday life, and perhaps how to confront and challenge it by drawing on their critical-thinking skills?

The above stimuli were intended to support discussion on values and morals, as they were relevant to the students' thinking about professional values in teaching. But it is also possible to use stimuli that are more directly linked to a

module's or session's aims. In order to explore the concept of curriculum, for example, I used images of classrooms from around the world (China, India, Germany, etc.) as stimuli, which resulted in rich and meaningful discussions about the nature of the curriculum and the influence of culture on curricula. Similarly, I used extracts from philosophers' original texts (such as Dewey, 1933) as stimuli, which also resulted in in-depth discussions about the nature of schools, schooling and education.

Extending the Reach of P4C in the Initial Teacher Education Curriculum

After becoming increasingly convinced about the value of such an approach for discussion-based learning in higher education, I decided to establish a second-year elective module entitled 'Philosophy for Young Children'. Primarily, this module was about developing students' knowledge of the pedagogy so that they could apply it in school. This was a highly beneficial experience for the 15 students who chose to study the module, with a positive impact on the students' own understanding of critical and reflective thinking (Demissie, 2015).

However, I was also aware that one module was unlikely to have a sustained impact on the 15 students, and none on the majority of students who did not elect to do this module. I therefore initiated a project to integrate the P4C pedagogy in the Bachelor of Arts undergraduate programme. All of the tutors in the programme undertook a four-hour introductory course, and six tutors collaborated in using this pedagogy in a professional learning module. As a result, all of our first-year students experienced this pedagogy from the first week of their degree, continuing with a four-hour introductory course in the second year, and the opportunity to undertake the full training in the final year. The first cohort from this 'experiment' has now finished, and their reflections on the influence of P4C on their personal development are highly promising.

The Challenges

The P4C pedagogy offers many benefits to a tutor. There are clear steps that are explicit to the students and the expectations are clear. For example, students will know that challenge and disagreements are not a threat to individuals, but a way of pursuing the truth. Moreover, the ground rules reinforce the principles that underpin the approach. However, it also provides an important reminder about the importance of questioning. For example, adopting a philosophical approach helps me to focus on key concepts in a module and to adopt Socratic questioning to extend and challenge thinking. P4C draws attention to tutors' questioning skills and the extent to which we use this to deepen students' learning and understanding. Indeed, one of the main findings from a recent self-study we undertook was how difficult it is to adopt a facilitative style, given the complexity for the small-group learning context and our own lack of confidence in using open-ended-thinking questions.

There are, nonetheless, challenges in adopting this learner-centred, collaborative, process-based learning approach. Students have, in the past, questioned whether they are learning anything when discussing ideas in depth, and the relevance for assignment titles or questions. As we found in our self-study, there are also issues of empowering marginalised voices and how the tutor negotiates provocative and potentially provocative contributions. Of course, the ground rules and positive environment that P4C nurtures often play an important role in mediating some of these challenges. Nonetheless, there are often urgent and in-the-moment decisions to be made – for example, on how to respond to unexpected and potentially sexist or racist viewpoints. Thus, whilst P4C creates a space for dialogue and, as a pluralist pedagogy, is also a space for multiple perspectives that are positive and welcome, it can also be difficult to manage. An added issue to consider is tutor reflexiveness in how their position of power can subtly shape the enquiry – for example, in terms of the stimulus or the direction of the dialogue, and the way this might influence who talks and what is talked about.

The Way Forward

P4C is an exciting, unpredictable and authentic pedagogy, but at the same time risky and potentially problematic. In the context of current higher education pressures of large numbers and accountability measures, it is easy to succumb to these pressures and to forego the passions and interests that in the first place motivated us to become higher education tutors. It is certainly difficult to 'measure' the value and benefit of adopting this pedagogy. However, the reason I continue to champion P4C is because I see its value as a transformative pedagogy. We are not just educating engineers or teachers; we are also educating future citizens who have the skills and dispositions to live in a democratic society. The case is particularly strong for student teachers, who are also role models for young people and best placed to nurture the skills and dispositions of democratic citizenship. It is for this reason that I and my colleagues continue integrate the P4C pedagogy in our initial teacher education curriculum, in the process developing our own skills and dispositions for teaching in higher education.

Some, of course, will question the relevance of a school pedagogy to the higher education context. But my experience is that pedagogy is flexible enough to be adapted from the youngest age (four-year-olds) to adults. Indeed, a closer look at the learning process and outcomes of higher education and P4C shows that there are many overlaps. P4C's aim is the improvement of reasoning and judgement, through the development of critical and creative thinking. It is a pedagogy where the 'teacher' is not seen as the source of all knowledge, but as a facilitator of students' thinking and learning, where they are empowered to decide the focus of the discussion because pupils' ideas and interests are valued. In the same way, the Quality Assurance Agency's (2014) learning outcomes for

higher education also include the development of critical thinking, reasoning and judgement as a key outcome for higher education.

P4C is a central tenet of my practice because, on a practical, basic level, it makes me a better educator. It equips me with excellent tools to develop my own questioning skills and also reminds me to pay equal attention to the cognitive as well as the relational and affective dimensions of learning. But, more importantly, my commitment to this pedagogy is driven and sustained by the complex and challenging world in which we live, and the professional and personal motivation to do something about it. Like Nixon (2012, p. 17), I believe that higher education is 'one of the spaces within which we are able to set about the imaginative task of learning to live together in a world of difference'.

References

Barnett, R. (1990) *The Idea of Higher Education.* Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Brookfield, S. & Preskill, S. (2010) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: tools and techniques for democratic classrooms.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Darling-Hammond, H. (2000) How Teacher Education Matters, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 166-173. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487100051003002

Demissie, F. (2015) Promoting Student Teachers' Reflective Thinking through a Philosophical Community of Enquiry Approach, *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(12), 1. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2015v40n12.1

Department for Education (2011) Teachers' Standards. https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00066-2011

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think: a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* Boston, MA: D.C. Heath.

Engin, M. (2016) Contributions and Silence in Academic Talk: exploring learner experiences of dialogic interaction, *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 12, 78-86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2016.11.001

Fejes, A., Johansson, J. & Dahlgren, M. (2005) Learning to Play the Seminar Game: students' initial encounters with a basic working form in higher education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(1), 29-41. https://doi.org/10.1080/1356251052000305516

Gunn, V. (2007) *Approaches to Small Group Learning and Teaching.* Glasgow: Learning and Teaching Centre, University of Glasgow. https://nanopdf.com/download/approaches-to-small-group-learning-and-teaching_pdf

Jacques, D. (2000) *Learning in Groups: a handbook for improving group work.* London: Kogan Page.

Klassen, J. (2012) *I Want My Hat Back.* London: Walker Books.

Lipman, M. (2003) *Thinking in Education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511840272

Lipman M., Dean, M., Paul, A. (1990) *Socrates for Six Year Olds*. London: BBC.

Lipman, M., Sharp, A.M. & Oscanyan, F.S. (1980) *Philosophy in the Classroom*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Meer, J. van der (2012) 'I Don't Really See Where They Are Going with It': communicating purpose and rationale to first year students, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 36(1), 81-94. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.596195

Nixon, J. (2012) *Higher Education and the Public Good*. London: Continuum.

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2014) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Standards. The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf

Rocca, K. (2010) Student Participation in the College Classroom: an extended multidisciplinary literature review, *Communication Education*, 59(2), 185-213. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520903505936

SAPERE (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education) (2010) Handbook to accompany the level 1 course. https://www.sapere.org.uk/

Sharpe, A.M. (2004) The Other Dimension of Caring Thinking, *Critical and Creative Thinking*, 12(1), 9-15.

Skidmore, D. & Murakami, K. (2016) *Dialogic Pedagogy: the importance of dialogue in teaching and learning*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783096220

Van Der Meer, J. (2012) 'I don't really see where they're going with it': communicating purpose and rationale to first year students, *Journal of Further and Higher education*, 36(1), 81-94. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.596195

Wade, R. (1994) Teacher Education Students' Views on Class Discussions: implications for fostering critical reflection, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10(2), 231-243. https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(94)90015-9

FUFY DEMISSIE is a Senior Lecturer at the Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, and teaches on the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Dr Demissie is also the P4C lead for the Institute and, in this role, she collaborates with local and international organisations. *Correspondence*: f.a.demissie@shu.ac.uk