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Philosophy in Schools: The Cal-State, Long Beach Program

Debbie Whittaker



The Center for the Advancement of Philosophy in the Schools (CAPS) is a philosophy outreach program founded in 2000 and housed at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). Upper-division and graduate-level philosophy majors enroll in Philosophy in Education, which meets once a week for three hours. The students spend the first five weeks learning pedagogical skills, and do some practice teaching in class. They are then paired with local teachers in the community, including elementary, middle school, and high school.

Once a week the university students “do” philosophy with the public school students. They engage in philosophy games, thought experiments, role-playing, drawing/art activities, journal writing, small group discussions, all in an effort to raise philosophical awareness and critical thinking among the K–12 students.

The Philosophy in Education course requirements include writing a term paper, writing journals reflecting on their public school experiences, presenting a formal lesson to the class, creating three original lesson plans, and writing an article for submission to *Questions Magazine*. Class time is also spent on problem-solving, lesson planning and feedback, and philosophical discussion.

The goals of the CAPS program include: Increased student scores on critical thinking and reasoning tests; improved student involvement in class discussions and activities; and creating a classroom environment that encourages critical, creative, and philosophical writing and thinking.

Further information, including a history of CAPS, can be found in “Integrating Philosophy for Children and Young Adults into the Public Schools: Tales from Long Beach, California” by Sara Goering and Debbie Whittaker in *Theory and Research in Education* Vol. 5(3), 2007, pp. 341–355, Sage Publications.



The editorial board generally agreed that this reflection is a fine illustration of how philosophical teaching and dialogue is a two-way street. Many who would acknowledge this to be the case with graduate students and bright undergraduates would think it to be less the case with pre-college students. As this piece and others published in prior issues of Questions indicate, we should not underestimate the capabilities of pre-college students to reflect upon classic philosophical works and themes, nor their capacity for novel thought.—Editors

Life Is a Journey . . .

Maryann Krikorian

My partner and I ended our last philosophy lesson with the topic question of, “what is personal identity?” At the corner of the classroom there was a boy who sat patiently listening to the discussion. The discussion was moving rapidly. Students battled with one another over the basis of personal identity; was it distinguished by our personality or by our appearance? I could tell by the boy’s body language he was just waiting for the perfect moment to share his thoughts about the topic. Once the debate simmered down, the boy calmly raised his hand. When I called on him to share, the boy simply replied, “Life is a journey . . . and along the way you figure yourself out, maybe for better or for worse.” At first, I didn’t make a correlation with his comment and the material we were discussing as a class. I simply thanked him for his participation and moved on to the next student who had their hand up waiting to be called upon.



After leaving the classroom that day I was still pondering the boy's comment. The comment was such a unique interpretation of the discussion that it had me thinking all day; and then it dawned on me! The majority of the students were coming to the conclusion that personal identity was based on a person's personality. If the theory the students concluded was hypothetically correct then who we are is defined by multiple factors, such as environmental influences. My immediate response to that would be, through a combination of time and trial and error we learn to be "better" people. Up until this point, I hadn't thought much about the possibility of evolving into a "worse" person.

I have always believed that people are innately good. People may do bad things, for reasons unknown, but the nature of their being is not to be evil. The boy stated his comment with a tone of bittersweet serenity. I then realized that I thought people were innately good because it made me comfortable to think so. It was comforting to know that people don't mean to intentionally cause harm to one another. However, the reality of it was that my ideology could be incorrect. Philosophy is about finding and creating your own understanding of things by observing the world and critically examining it. I then concluded that because everyone experiences a totally different aspect of life we will examine and observe the world in a different light. Philosophy will always be relative to a person, and there will always be questions with abstract answers we will not know for certain. To accept this understanding was to feel the bittersweet serenity I felt in the boy's words that day in the classroom. It was a bitter feeling because we would never have a direct answer to all our questions, and it was a sweet serenity because the fact that we will never have a direct answer to all our questions was our answer in itself.

I entered the classroom as a "philosophy facilitator," and I left that class as an equal. In the end I was just as much of a student as he was a teacher. I was taught something I never paid much mind to before, and I realized that the teachings of philosophy have no boundaries. It didn't matter that I was a college student working on a minor in philosophy. A ninth grade boy was just as much of a philosopher as I was.

Personal Identity

Brandon T. Minnis



As with most things new, it can be nerve racking to experience the unknown. My first lesson doing philosophy with ninth graders was just that: nerve racking. I cannot remember the last time I was undergoing such anxiety. I had prepared a lesson that was different from the other philosophy students. Most of them were starting with a "what is philosophy" lesson. Although explaining the definition of philosophy is a good place to start, I felt that having the students practice philosophy would be most beneficial for them. Students are often given definitions and rules to follow. I felt that by allowing them to think critically when faced with a philosophical idea without any sort of constraint, it would permit them to explore all the possibilities on their own. When given rules, we are all apt to following them. Philosophy is about defying rules; it is about making loopholes and discovering problems. I chose for my first lesson to be a discussion on personal identity, and to dive right into philosophical problems.

The first thing I did after being introduced to the class was to ask them to write their names on a piece of paper folded "hot dog" style. The next thing I had them do was to write any name they wished to be called by on the back. At first, there was hesitation in the students. They were not sure what I was asking of them so I encouraged creativity and explained that they could pick anything they wanted. I made a joke saying that if they wanted to they could just draw a circle and I would call on them as "picture of a circle." One student actually wrote the word triangle and as promised was called upon as "Triangle." My idea behind this was to help me in two ways. The first was to simply draw some sort of distinction between twenty-five ninth graders I was being exposed to all at once. For me it was easier to remember a name like "Captain Lightning." It also shows a lot about a person—the name they chose for themselves—giving me a quick way to learn about the student. The other reason was to help me show that names do not tell us what personal identity is. The other set-up I used was a technique I use for myself to help creative thought. I had the class close their eyes and take deep breaths for a minute or so. This calmed them and immediately focused them on what I was saying. Throughout the lecture when the

(continued on next page)

Beauty

Cho-Kiu Lam

What is beauty?

Is it the winter's gently falling snow
That gives the night a sudden glow?
Or is it the first patch of green
Creeping out from the ice unseen?

Beauty can hide everywhere.
It lingers in the air.
It breaks the glorious day of light,
And twinkles in the night.

The sapphire sea so clear and deep
Sparkles in the sun like a goddess asleep.
The water reflects the azure sky,
Where white clouds lie and angels fly.

Streams of red, orange, green and yellow
Stretch into the wonders of rainbow.
Roses are red, lilies are white,
Together they weave the colour of delight.

Beauty can hide everywhere.
It flutters in the air.
It wanders in designer shirts,
And hangs on mini skirts.

Friendly fairies and naughty pixies,
Will magic in stories never cease?
DO, RE, MI, FA, SO, LA, TI, DO!
Oh, see how the melodies go!

The *Sunflowers* so golden and dazzling,
Are like stars in the dark, sparkling.
The Eiffel tower that stands so tall,
Is like a giant that will never fall.

But now, the idea of beauty
Is surprisingly funny.
Women ever so skinny -
That is what they call pretty!

One after another,
Slimming companies start to gather.
Enormous billboards pressing us flat,
Screaming at us, "You're too fat!"

Thinking back to the earlier days,
Large and heavy is what they praise.
So is there absolute beauty?
Or is there beauty that will never vary?

Nobody knows and I don't too.
But I happen to have a clue . . .

You're as beautiful as a dream,
As long as you have the bright confident beam.