



This discussion of the purpose and nature of education is particularly salient to the task of philosophical inquiry for children. It not only represents an opportunity for children to engage in guided philosophical inquiry into aspects of their daily lives, but also an opportunity to perform a meta-analysis of sorts of the type of task in which they are engaged in the course of their education, including this very session. The ramifications are thus quite far-reaching. Note that the facilitator asks questions that help the participants to clarify their terms, to be specific about the subjects on which they are speaking, and to engage with each other rather than just himself. The facilitator also prompts students to elaborate and periodically offers summary points of where he thinks the discussion has been in order to refocus the attention of these young participants. In our experience, these are all effective techniques for facilitating philosophical reflection. We have left the students' use of slang and null terms as originally transcribed because it gives what we believe to be an accurate impression of how thoughtful ideas are often expressed by young persons in very casual language.—Editors

Wouldn't All of Us Be Dimwitted if We Didn't Go to Class?

A Discussion with Fifth-Grade Children

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Nathan [Facilitator] I have a question . . . for Penny since she's the person that asked the question [wouldn't all of us be dimwitted if we didn't go to class?], and I'm wondering what you mean by dimwitted?

Penny: Dimwitted means that you didn't know anything, you didn't know what one plus one was, is, and . . .

Voice: What?

Penny: If one . . . if . . . it's sort of like the meaning of stupid.

Nathan: So do you mean like . . . you mean like not being able to read and write or do math or do you mean something else?

Penny: Well, yeah.

Nathan: Yeah what?

Penny: Well, if you're in fifth grade and you don't go to class. And you're supposed to be reading at this age.

Nathan: Okay . . . so what do we think? I think Penny seems to be assuming that if we didn't go to class then we would be dimwitted, or we wouldn't be able to do, what we were supposed to do at certain ages, so do people agree with that or have different thoughts about that? Thelma?

Thelma: Well, I, I disagree with that, um, because you don't have to go to class to be like . . . like if you read, like, there's this book in social studies that, um . . . Dorothy's, that we are reading with Dorothy and it's about like the ancient world and stuff. And it's a book like with a lot of facts and if you read that . . . if we studied this on our own free time, but it's not actually a class, then I don't think we would be dimwitted. Or if like over the dinner table, if um, um, my Dad used to do this with me um he would quiz me on my timetables, so we would be sitting at the dinner table, and he'd say six times six, and I'd have to like answer right away, and that's not class. But you're learning.

Nathan: Go ahead Penny.

Penny: I'm saying if your friends and teacher are all like if you are close to it or if you go to school with your friends to touch up your timetables. . .

Thelma: But like I said earlier you study on your own free time.

Penny: But like you could be . . .

Thelma: It wouldn't necessarily have to be in school or in the class to learn or study

you could just do it on your own time like . . .

Nathan: Ah-hah.

Thelma: . . . like, just, one, what's your favorite animal?

Voices: What? What? [Laughter]

Nathan: Just give one, just give one example.

Penny: Okay, dogs.

Thelma: Alright. So you really like dogs, and you really want to learn about dogs. So when you're at home you're going to look up about dogs and start learning about dogs just because you want to. And that's not class, it's just something you do on your own free time.

Nathan: Could it be class?

Thelma: Well it could if someone was like . . .

Voice: Making you do it.

Thelma: . . . yeah, teaching you. I think is what class is.

Nathan: Ah-hah. . . . So you're saying that a class involves teaching, like it involves a process of teaching. There has to be a teacher, there has to be a student for it to be a class.

Thelma: Yeah.

Nathan: Okay. So Robert [holding up an 'A' card in order to signal that an assumption has been detected] you're, you're identifying an assumption.

Robert: Thelma who's . . . are you assuming that we would all do, like, teach ourselves?

Thelma: No I'm, I'm, I'm saying that wouldn't all of us, the question is wouldn't all of us be dimwitted if we didn't go to class and I think that I know that if I didn't go to class. And if I had, if I wasn't allowed to go to class. Or you know nobody wanted to teach me or something, then I would study on my own time because, um, I want to learn. And wouldn't all of us be dimwitted, I say no because I don't think that I would be dimwitted if I studied on my own time. So I'm saying, I'm not saying that all of us would study on our own time. The question was wouldn't all of us be dimwitted. So I don't think all of us would be dimwitted.

Nathan: If we're learning, then we're not dimwitted. Is that what you're suggesting? Like as long as we're learning, then there's no possibility for us to be dimwitted? Or is there a certain amount that we need to have learned?

Thelma: Well, if you have learned and you like know stuff then you're not dimwitted and like everything because . . . yeah, because like someone said babies are dimwitted, I don't think they're dimwitted because they know how to suck. And like they know how to cry when they're first born, and no one teaches them anything, they just know it. They're not, they're not dimwitted and they didn't go to class, they just know that.

Nathan: But why aren't, why aren't they dimwitted?

Thelma: They're not dimwitted because they were born with it. . . . They just, yeah, they just learned it.

Zachary: So what you're trying to say is, you don't have to, well . . . you don't have to have someone to teach you, you can teach yourself how to learn.

Robert: Or, or Misty, do you mean that sort of like some things we don't need to be taught we just know how to do it, it's like instinct. Like for a squirrel when one of us comes along, they, they run away, so. Maybe they would, maybe they would kind, maybe a sort of like a baby saying I'm hungry, whaa, whaa, whaa.

Jerome: I don't mean to be rebellious to anybody or anything about what anyone said. But if nobody went to class then the people who make the software and books. . . they probably wouldn't learn the things that they needed to know to write the books and software, so then we couldn't benefit from them.



On closer inspection, we discover more details and more questions.

Kathy: But, um, Robert said that nobody ever goes to class.

Thelma: Yeah.

Kathy: I mean like, say in the past. Nobody had gone to class, written the books, learned from the books, and then they pass it on and then . . .

Robert: Isn't that originally how it started? Some learn, learn-ed people in ancient, in long-ago times. They, no, not that far, not long ago, medieval times. The people, the lords and ladies and all those people. They, they knew things and they taught other people who taught other people, and everyone else learned from that and then, and then that happened on today, except that it's still going on, except not like that except we say, say a newspaper, for example. It tells us what we didn't know, or something that's going on in the world.

Clifford: Like that um tsunami, like.

Robert: Like the tsunami. Without radio, books, airplane and all that stuff, and smart people, we wouldn't be able to know what happened to other people, and then we would probably be thinking that a tsunami like that is an event of the gods, and not just some natural thing.

Nathan: Is it possible that what you're talking about, hmm, is what you're talking about what happens in class? Like . . .

Robert: Ah . . .

Nathan: If people pass on information either verbally through words or through books . . .

Robert: Yes, it is.

Nathan: Then, is that what's happening in class?

Robert: Yes, that is, that is what's happening in class, like the teachers learn the information from who knows where . . .

Nathan: Okay. [Lots of laughter].

Robert: The answer guide.

Nathan: A lot of times they just make it up. [Laughter].

Robert: Yeah, that too, but the teachers get their answers, let's not say how, ah, and then they pass it on to us, we pass it onto who knows where, and who knows where passes it, passes it on to somewhere.

Clifford: Who knows what!

Nathan: So . . .

Robert: And then somewhere passes it on to something else, and so on and so forth until it gets back to us, or the teachers, or it comes way back to an answer guide.

Nathan: Um-hum. So Robert's talking about, I heard you say multiple times, um, answers.

Robert: Yes.

Nathan: So we're talking about learning and sort of what it means to learn, whether we learn in class or we can learn outside of class. But when we talk about learning, I think some people would argue that answers are not necessarily enough. So . . .

Robert: Questions too.

Nathan: Is there more . . .

Robert: Yes, there's questions.

Nathan: . . . to learning and more to not being dimwitted than just . . .

Robert: There are questions.

Nathan: . . . learning answers.

Robert: You have to learn the questions and the answers.