Training teachers of philosophy in schools: thoughts from Australia

Abstract

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Philosophy can be taught in schools in a number of ways at a number of levels. In this contribution, I will focus on two. Firstly, students can be encouraged to take part in philosophical communities of inquiry, following the methods initiated by Matthew Lipman, at ages ranging from early childhood to the end of compulsory schooling. Secondly, senior students in the last two years of pre-university schooling, can study formal philosophy syllabuses. While there are clear differences in these two approaches, I will point out that there can also be considerable similarity in the methods used.

Turning to the training of teachers for these two approaches, we can distinguish between pre-service and in-service training. At a teacher training institution, a course in teaching philosophy can run for considerably more time, and those running the course can ensure the trainee teachers learn some philosophy for background for their teaching later on. After a brief survey of pre-service training in Australia, I will turn more attention on the question of training teachers of philosophy for those who have already completed their university qualifications.

Here again we can distinguish two groups: qualified teachers already in schools who commonly have little or no background in academic philosophy, and philosophers with at least undergraduate qualifications who have little or no teaching experience. In some cases - usually but not always those who wish to teach senior secondary philosophy courses - there are practicing teachers who have solid backgrounds in academic philosophy.

After a survey of the variety of ways in which in-service training is delivered in Australia, I will concentrate on the different needs of the two groups identified above and how they might be met. This will lead to a consideration of the qualifications and experience needed by the trainers of teachers themselves, and a look at the Australian approach of having three levels of training available.

There are many theoretical and practical difficulties in providing effective training for teachers, equipping them to deliver high quality philosophical experiences to their students. I will finish by outlining the what I see as the major challenges.

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Philosophy in schools

Philosophy is one of the oldest and most basic disciplines. Indeed, it can be argued that most other disciplines originated in philosophy. Despite this, in many countries including Australia, until recently, philosophy has not been taught in schools, and could only be studied at the university level. Even in those countries - mainly on continental Europe - where it has been possible (or even compulsory) to study philosophy at school, it has been largely restricted to the final two years of school.

The first contrast I will make is between philosophy in schools conceived of as an academic discipline suitable only for students who choose to study it at the age of 16 or so, and philosophy as a core discipline to be taught from a much earlier age, possibly even when students first enter school.

Besides the age at which we commence philosophy, I will also distinguish between the formal and the informal approach. By formal study, I mean a systematic approach to philosophical themes that are recognizable in the tradition, and canonical philosophical texts. Informal philosophy, on the other hand, is less systematic, covers themes that are at least partially raised by the students themselves, and largely avoids reading canonical philosophical texts, or even explicitly identifying positions and authors from the tradition. Of course, the formal/informal distinction is not a sharp one, and any particular philosophy course can combine the features I have outlined to a greater or lesser degree.

If we look at the philosophical offerings in schools, we find that generally the formal approach is more likely at senior secondary school, and the informal approach in the primary and lower to middle secondary years. Certainly this is true in Australia. One of the most prominent of the informal offerings, and the one on which I will most often focus, is the range of courses drawn from the Philosophy for Children movement, originated by Matthew Lipman and his associates (Lipman, 1991; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980). Ignoring the variations of approach in this reasonably diverse movement, I shall call this approach the P4C style.

Formal philosophy is generally offered as compulsory or optional courses by pre-university examination boards, such as the French Baccalaureate, A levels in the UK and the various Philosophy courses offered in Australian states. However, as the example of Theory of Knowledge, a compulsory course in the International Baccalaureate, shows, some systems do have informal philosophy in the senior secondary school years. Furthermore, the rise of informal philosophy at earlier stages of schooling has, in some places, influenced the teaching of senior formal courses, bringing in a greater degree of exploratory and discussion based learning.

Before turning my attention to teacher training for philosophy in schools, I would like to outline briefly the P4C style of informal philosophy in schools initiated by Lipman and adapted by many others around the world. The core method Lipman developed with Ann Margaret Sharp is the community of inquiry - a term Lipman took from Charles Sanders Peirce. In its standard version, a class will read together a purpose-written story which involves young people discussing incidents in their lives. The author of the story will have inserted into it philosophical 'hooks' - ideas and puzzles that reflect those to be found in the philosophical tradition.

After the reading, students are invited to raise questions and puzzles they have about the text. These are collected by the teacher, and one of the questions is chosen for discussion. A whole class discussion of the question follows. Of course, there are many variations that can and have been made to this standard method, but all of them share an emphasis on valuing students' questions and placing discussion at the center.

The teacher's role

Much could be said about how students approach the discussion and what sorts of philosophical moves they can make, but for the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the role of the teacher, as this role is vital to the success of the community of inquiry. Since our focus in this forum is the training of teachers, then understanding what sort of approach we want teachers to be able to take in the community of inquiry is of central importance.

Running the discussion phase of a community of inquiry is very different from what we might call a traditional teaching role, though it does have some similarities with other forms of 'progressive education'. In a traditional classroom, the teacher is seen as the fount of knowledge, and the students as lacking that knowledge. Consequently, the teacher does most of the talking, conveying knowledge to the students. Even if other activities happen (such as experimental work in a science classroom), the action occurs according to a plan mapped out and controlled by the teacher. The teacher is cast as the expert, and the students as ignorant.

In a traditional classroom, questions have a role to play. However, the teacher keeps a tight rein on questioning, as much research has shown (e.g., Dillon, 1994). Teachers ask questions to which they already know the answers. Students attempt to supply that answer, and the teacher then states whether it is correct or not, before asking another question. Occasionally, students ask questions, but these are almost always requests for information they lack - often seeking what to do next. Teachers supply the answer, and the class continues.

Thus, teachers in a traditional classroom retain power over both the content and the process of the lesson, even in discussion. Many teachers find this control highly reassuring, as they fear losing control of the class - with good reason. A class out of control is not one in which much good learning is taking place.

In a community of inquiry, teachers have to let go of some of this control, particularly in regard to the content of the discussion. Indeed, this loosening of control is the main thing that teachers notice when they first observe (or take part in) a community of

inquiry. Consequently, when they run their own community of inquiry, they will often be happy with the process if students are talking animatedly to each other. But, as Susan Gardner (1996) has pointed out, this is not enough. The discussion ought also to be doing real, rigorous, deep philosophical inquiry. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that this happens.

In other words, one of the major lessons a teacher will have to learn in order to run a community of philosophical inquiry is how to exert a different sort of control and power in their classroom (seeSprod, 2001, especially chapter 3, for a detailed analysis). We can capture this to an extent by saying that they have to learn to let go of content, but retain oversight of the processes used. However, this is an oversimplification, as content and process are not completely independent of each other. If, for example, students are merely swapping anecdotes about dreams they have had, then little in the way of philosophical inquiry is going on. The topic should rather be something like the nature of dreams and their relation to waking reality, or the possibility that all our experience comes from a dream, or some other philosophically interesting puzzle to do with dreams.

So, to train a teacher to run a worthwhile and philosophical community of inquiry in their classroom, we need to ensure that they become capable of *both* prompting students to use an appropriate procedural move (such as giving reasons, assessing assumptions, drawing conclusions) at an appropriate time *and* of being aware of what directions for the discussion may well prove to be philosophically interesting.

I have slipped above from talking about a community of inquiry to the more specific term, a community of philosophical inquiry. This raises the question as to whether all communities of inquiry need to be philosophical, or whether we could have, say, a community of historical, or scientific, inquiry. I believe that we can, but I want to make a couple of observations here. Firstly, all that I have said concerning the need for the teacher to have appropriate knowledge in both process and content will still apply, Secondly, I believe that such discipline based inquiries, when well run so that they inquire deeply, will inevitably dip into the philosophical foundations of the discipline involved. Finally, of course, in this forum we are concerned with the teaching of philosophy, not of other disciplines.

Types of teacher training

Since we have seen that there are different types of philosophy teaching in schools, it should not be surprising that there will also be differences in the ways in which teachers are trained. Indeed, there is another complication here, in that the backgrounds of those we are to train will also differ. Let us consider some of these.

The first is whether those we are to train are studying for a teaching qualification (pre-service), or whether they are qualified and teaching in schools already (in-service). While many of the aims we will have will be the same, there will be distinct differences. A pre-service teacher will not yet have formed teaching habits which may need to be re-thought. As the trainees will be engaged in a lengthy qualification period, most likely on a full time basis, there can be considerable time to learn the theory and engage in practice sessions. Furthermore, the instructors will have the ability to require the study of some background philosophy. Training in teaching

philosophy can be integrated into the rest of the course being followed. Of course, these advantages are only available if sufficient time is allocated to the philosophical community of inquiry, which will be competing with other sections of the course.

The situation is quite different for those who are already employed as a teacher, usually full time, in a school. Training in teaching philosophy is likely to take place outside of normal working hours, over a relatively short, concentrated period of time, since the time available is generally much less. As the participants already have a full time load, there are limits on how much background reading can be expected. Commonly, schools will have multiple demands on their professional development time and resources, so training in any one area may be piecemeal and intermittent.

Before exploring these two areas further, I also want to draw attention to the another important difference in background. Some of those we are training to teach philosophy will have a strong background in the discipline, while others will have little, if any. Roughly speaking, teachers aiming to teach a formal philosophy course, probably at the senior secondary level, are very likely to have studied philosophy at university. Teachers who are preparing to teach informal philosophy will commonly have little or no formal philosophy in their background. Then there is a third group - those who have a formal philosophy background but no teaching qualification or experience, yet who are keen to be involved in teaching philosophy in schools. Each group will have somewhat different needs.

Pre-service teacher training in Australia

Unfortunately, I cannot tell you much about initial teacher training for P4C style philosophy in schools, as little of it actually takes place. I know of only one compulsory unit in initial training that focus on the community of inquiry at present, though I do know that some others have been offered in the past. At the Queensland University of Technology, philosophy in schools is an 18 hour core unit in the third year of the primary school Bachelor of Education. Following the unit, students must run a community of inquiry in a school, and discuss their experiences with other students.

Such units depend very heavily on two factors: having an enthusiast in the School of Education, and achieving the often difficult feat of convincing the School as a whole that such a course is needed - even if it is only offered as an option. Even then, once that enthusiast moves on, the unit may be dropped - Schools of Education often do not seek a new appointment to maintain the course. In some courses, for example at Monash University, an enthusiast is able to get a small amount of exposure to the community of inquiry into broader units, such as social science methods, citizenship education or curriculum theory. The goal of ensuring that newly trained teachers in Australia are all conversant with the community of inquiry - let alone a philosophical one - is a long way off, even for primary teachers.

To my knowledge, secondary trainees who want to teach one of the senior secondary formal philosophy courses are offered no specialist training in that subject. Instead, they will most likely do a methods course in a wider area, such as social science or humanities. The general techniques they learn here can then be applied to philosophy - though it is doubtful that many are taught techniques that are philosophy-oriented,

such as the community of inquiry. This is probably due to two main factors: philosophy courses at this level are relatively new, and the numbers of schools and students taking these subjects are still relatively low. However, such teachers do sometimes turn up at in-service professional development workshops, once they are teaching. FAPSA associations in some areas (e.g. Victoria and Western Australia) also run in-service workshops specifically for teachers of senior level formal philosophy courses.

In-service teacher training in Australia

While a few universities (notably Queensland and QUT) offer professional development units in philosophy in schools, the main means of reaching in-service teachers in Australia is through FAPSA workshops. The Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations has set out a framework (presently under review) for the delivery and certification of this training, which is generally run by the individual associations, or by individuals connected to the associations. Such training of teachers to use P4C style philosophy in their classroom is labeled Level 1.

Up until now, the minimum length of the first training at Level 1 is two full days (though at present some associations run 2.5 or 3 day workshops). Anything shorter than this is has been considered to be a 'taster session', insufficient for the teachers involved to take the techniques back to their own classroom. The workshop involves a mixture of participation in 'real' communities of inquiry consisting of all the participants in the workshop, consideration of theoretical issues that underpin the practice, and an opportunity for the participants to try their own community of inquiry in their own classroom. For this latter reason, there has been a gap between the days of the workshop.

FAPSA are now questioning whether two days of training is sufficient for participants to gain an adequate basic understanding of the community of inquiry. There remains a worry amongst those of us in FAPSA that teachers go back into schools with only a minimal understanding of the ways in which to bring rigor (particularly philosophical depth) to their communities of inquiry, and that the discussions they have in their classes drift away from philosophy.

Of course, if genuine open discussions are happening in the class, this may well be an improvement on previous practice, but it isn't philosophy. Rather, it can be psychological speculation about the characters in the story, or swapping of tenuously related anecdotes, or something else. We suspect that two day trained teachers are often insufficiently aware of their need to monitor the discussion and intervene at appropriate times to push it into more rigorous philosophical areas. Moreover, their philosophical background may not be strong enough to identify fruitful moves to make.

The wide range of materials produced in the P4C style movement tries to deal with these problems in much the same way, though not always in the same depth, as Lipman did originally - by writing support material that provides background ideas, exercises and, especially, discussion plans. These plans contain a carefully sequenced set of questions that teachers can draw on to move the discussion into more productive and philosophical areas.

If teachers do use these materials well, then we believe it is likely that they will develop their abilities to strengthen their practice. However, there is no guarantee that they do use the support material. Many teachers want to use the community of inquiry with other trigger experiences, to fit into their teaching plans, in which caseno such support is available.

Concerns like these have led to plans to restructure Level 1 training in Australia. FAPSA - in discussion with SAPERE in the UK - is developing a three stage model of Level 1 training. The first (Introduction) will be similar to the initial 2 day workshop mentioned above. The second (Established) three day workshop will provide deeper professional development and leading to certification from FAPSA as a trained leader of communities of inquiry in the teacher's own classroom. The third (Advanced) three or four day workshop will focus on more detailed study of the techniques for conducting a community of inquiry, the philosophical ideas that commonly arise in classrooms, and how to develop new materials, tying them to the philosophical issues raised. It will equip the teacher to coach other, less experienced teachers. Entry to each stage will require not only the lower stage training, but evidence of having sufficient classroom experience with the community of inquiry since the training, together with appropriate reading.

At present, our Level 1 workshops commonly attract both working teachers with little or no philosophical background, and a smaller number of philosophy graduates without teaching qualifications or experience. In recognition of this fact, the Advanced workshops will, in part, be tailored to strengthening the missing parts: giving teachers a better philosophical grasp, or equipping philosophers with classroom techniques.

Training the trainers

In order to ensure that Level 1 training is delivered by those with a sufficiently strong grasp of the theory and practice of P4C style communities of inquiry, FAPSA (and its predecessors) have been running seven day Level 2 workshops - designed to produce the leaders of Level 1 workshops - for about 30 years. Over that time, the details of how they are run have evolved. In the 1980s, they followed the pattern established in the USA by Lipman and his colleagues, some of whom came to Australia to help run them. At that time, Lipman's view was that all Level 1 presenters should hold a PhD in philosophy.

As someone who had become very enthusiastic about P4C after being introduced to it by Laurence Splitter in 1986, I wanted to attend a Level 2 workshop. However, I did not at that time hold a PhD (just a major in philosophy in my BSc). I argued that the expertise of practicing teachers was not being valued, and that for the P4C community of inquiry to work well in the classroom, the training needed to give weight to both philosophical matters and classroom management expertise - many philosophy PhDs lacked the latter.

In recognition of the need for *both* good pedagogical and philosophical knowledge in the trainers of teachers for P4C style philosophy, FAPSA now accredits Level 2 participants as either a Teacher Educator (Philosopher) or a Teacher Educator

(Classroom Practitioner) depending on their background. If someone has both a strong teaching background and training in philosophy to at least degree level, they can gain both accreditations.

After their Level 2 training, a Teacher Educator (Classroom Practice) may improve their philosophical background through further study of formal philosophy, and apply for the full accreditation. Similarly, a Teacher Educator (Philosopher) can deepen their classroom experience and move to full accreditation.

FAPSA requires that Level 1 workshops run under its name give sufficient emphasis to both the pedagogical techniques of running a community of inquiry, and the philosophical ideas that lie behind the materials used. Consequently, a leader who runs a Level 1 workshop on their own will need to have been accredited in both classroom practice and philosophy. More commonly, Level 1 workshops are run by several leaders who between them have both accreditations.

The leaders of Level 2 workshops are considered to have Level 3 training. However, FAPSA do not run Level 3 workshops. Rather, we use an apprenticeship model. When a Level 2 workshop is planned, a sufficiently experienced person may be invited to join the team presenting the workshop. Suitable experience includes previous Level 2 training followed by running Level 1 workshops, considerable classroom experience of community of inquiry and strong theoretical understanding. While we do not insist that all the presenters are equally strong in classroom practice and philosophical background, the team together must have considerable expertise in both.

The challenges of in-service teacher training

In discussing the issues and challenges that arise in training teachers to engage in philosophy with their classes, I will divide them into two categories: practical and theoretical. However, this is a rough division only, as the two are not clearly separated. I don't have solutions to many of these challenges, though I will occasionally make suggestions for approaches that might work.

Under the heading Practical, I will discuss issues to do with getting access to teachers, both initially and for follow up. The Theoretical category will look more at issues that affect how we structure training to be maximally effective. While the focus in this section as a whole is on the training of teachers already in schools, many of these considerations will apply to the other contexts which I have identified.

Practical

Given the wide variety of demands on schools, a major practical problem is convincing schools and teachers that seeking training should be a high priority. Schools in Australia have professional development funds, which they allocate as they wish. These decisions can be made at two levels: the school principal or senior administration can decide on a school wide focus, or individual teachers can choose training that fit their own interests or perceived needs. Our advertising of courses needs, first, to get into the hands of those who might be interested and, secondly, to

convince them of the value of the training. Word of mouth is often the most effective advertising.

Even when teachers or schools have been convinced of the usefulness of the training, time is another constraint. Teaching is a time consuming profession, and courses need to be run when teachers are able and willing to come. Courses run during normal teaching time overcome this problem to a large extent, though they create further problems for the school in covering the classes from which teachers have been released. Hence, there can be pressure to make courses more attractive by shortening them - but this makes it difficult to include sufficient material and activities in the course, with the possible consequence that the training is too brief to be effective. Requiring teachers to undertake 5 days of training - the Level 1 Introductory and Established workshops - before we issue a Certificate is designed to overcome this.

Research shows that much professional development for teachers is ineffective because of a lack of follow up. Without reinforcement, initial teacher enthusiasm can wane, essential elements of the techniques can be weakened or lost, and opportunities to deepen and extend understanding and expertise are missing. There are several ways to combat this. The three stages at Level 1 are an obvious measure, though these face the same problems of competing for time and funds, often compounded by an attitude that "we have already done that". An alternative is to encourage schools to send a group of teachers for training, as they can support each other, swap tips and insights, and boost enthusiasm.

A related problem concerns continuity of training. If teachers are to build expertise, then training is best provided when they are ready to take the next step. These opportunities are not always available at an appropriate time, either because of the school based restrictions on the access to training, or because we, the providers, are unable to offer them.

Another constraint is that there may not be enough Level 2 trained presenters to meet the demand for courses. Most presenters run courses in addition to their full time duties in another job, and the dangers of overload or burnout are real. Encouraging teachers who are experienced with philosophy in schools to take the next step of Level 2 training is essential.

Theoretical

I have mentioned the tension that exists between the desire to keep courses short so as to attract more participants, and the need to have sufficient time to train teachers properly in what is a complex methodology. There is little point in training teachers if they do not go away with a reasonably accurate idea of how to implement a philosophical community of inquiry in their own classroom.

A central concern here is that the discussions in their class do not lose their philosophical edge. As I have noted, teachers seldom have a philosophical background. Yet, having a good mental map of the philosophical ground, so that the teacher can see where a particular discussion could go - and can nudge it in those directions through their interventions in the discussion - is vital.

I have mentioned some of the ways teachers can be assisted here through the manuals/support materials: summaries for teachers of the philosophical issues, discussion plans and exercises designed to being out the philosophical. However, it is worth noting that the Lipman manuals on which such materials are based are attached to a lengthy novel, and hence a teacher who uses the manual conscientiously will be led successively through many related philosophical puzzles and approaches, and thus will gradually build up more understanding and expertise.

We need to ask ourselves whether the trend in Australia - and many other countries - away from using Lipman novels and manuals is having a deleterious effect on this ongoing philosophical education for teachers. It is perfectly understandable why we have moved away from the Lipman novels: Australian teachers do not like monolithic programs. Rather, they prefer to devise their own classroom plans, and to fit philosophy sessions into those by choosing related philosophy materials from those available. In doing so, they may lose the philosophical connections, continuity and progression that come with Lipman's well designed materials.

This leads to a related issue: teachers can use stories or other triggers for philosophical discussion that they have located themselves, because they fit into their broader plan. Since such materials do not come with a philosophical commentary or discussion plans, then the teacher is thrown back on their own background knowledge, which may not be philosophically strong. While we might wish that teachers get a lot of experience with supported material before they choose their own, we need to address how to recognize and develop the philosophical: the Advanced stage of Level 1 training is designed to help, but not all teachers will take it.

Not all participants in Level 1 training need philosophical support, though. As I have mentioned, some of those in workshops are philosophy graduates who would like to run communities of inquiry in school, but do not have teacher training. Their needs are somewhat different. While both they and teachers need to learn the techniques of running a community of inquiry, teachers are able to draw upon a solid knowledge of general classroom practice, which philosophy graduates lack. We cannot possibly provide full teacher training in a short workshop but, if we have such people on a course, we do need to provide some training to help them feel comfortable working with children.

More generally, we need to pay attention to the question of where philosophy can fit into an already crowded curriculum. While we think that philosophy deserves its own place, schools can be reluctant to make time available. For this reason, and also because understanding any subject in depth arguably requires inquiry into its philosophical roots (e.g. philosophy of science, historiography), we need to consider how to incorporate philosophical inquiry within the disciplines traditionally taught in schools. To do so requires both alerting teachers to the place of the philosophical in their subject, and equipping them with the capacities to run an appropriate community of inquiry.

Finally, I want to raise the question of making philosophy a compulsory subject in schools. Presumably, everyone here thinks philosophy is important, and possibly most of you believe that it should be taught in schools. So, should we be pushing for it to become a compulsory core subject in schools? Attractive as this idea may be, I

believe that there would be dangers in introducing it too quickly. The main problem is that there are not enough teachers with the background and training to teach philosophy well. If teachers are told they have to teach a subject about which they know little, without adequate training, then the teaching will generally be poor and uninspiring.

Hence, in my mind, making philosophy a compulsory school subject would need to be preceded by a massive teacher professional development campaign, involving all primary teachers, and all affected secondary teachers. Moreover, such a campaign would require a large number of Level 2 accredited workshop leaders, and in Australia at least, we do not have anywhere near enough of them. Consequently, I prefer a model that encourages teachers to be trained in philosophy in schools, until there is a reasonably widespread pool of expertise, and a growing realization amongst teachers in many schools that compulsory philosophy would benefit all children: something that I certainly believe.

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