

Australie : Fostering the exploration of philosophical and ethical questions among school students in Australasia

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In 2007, Hale School in Perth Western Australia embarked on a bold new project to promote higher order thinking among secondary school students. The intention was to provide young people with an opportunity to reflect on philosophical and ethical issues deeply while demonstrating good critical thinking and communication skills.

This initiative coincided with the introduction of a new Philosophy and Ethics course for senior school students in WA secondary schools. Foundational to the new course was critical thinking skills, the study of logic, argument mapping, formal and informal fallacies.

Another feature of the new three year course is the use of Community of Inquiry (COI). A COI is a learning tool introduced by Professor Matthew Lipman the founder of the Philosophy for Children movement¹. Students are introduced to stimulus material e.g. Plato's Ring of Gyges or Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron and then they are asked to design an open ended question arising from the stimulus material. The aim is to stir students to think about questions that are ambiguous and mysterious, where disciplines are overlapping and where simple answers are problematic. The questions are collated by a facilitator and then a discussion develops using specific COI processes. In learning to handle such questions, students must learn to be reflective, reasonable and judicious. These were the characteristics that shaped the structure of our first Philosothon. We decided to use the same criteria used for grading COI's in the new Philosophy and Ethics course as part of a scoring regime for students in the first Philosothon. (See appendix)

The benefits of Communities of Inquiry have been well documented in various studies. There is empirical evidence that teaching children reasoning skills early in life greatly improves other cognitive and academic skills and greatly assists learning in general. Over 74 studies have produced evidence of positive cognitive and social outcomes arising from the Community of Inquiry approach, even when used only in small doses. An extensive analysis of the benefits of COI can be found in a recently published article by Millett and Tapper in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2011) titled 'Benefits of Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry in Schools'.

Thus was born the Hale School Philosothon, a friendly 'competition' between schools in which students participated in a series of philosophical discussions. In 2007 nine schools accepted the invitation and each sent teams of five students for the first Philosothon. Following a short welcome and house-keeping matters a light meal and drinks were served to participants, their teachers and parents. We then divided students into eight "Communities of Inquiry", each group consisting of nine students, one student from each school. Each COI ran for 30 minutes.

The Philosothon is not a lightweight airy fairy talk fest. Students prepare carefully for the evening. They are given the topic questions well in advance and some stimulus reading materials. Schools differ in the way they select and prepare their students. Many schools offer trials and select students on their aptitude and skill. Once a team is selected students meet regularly leading up to the event and are prepared by a coach, usually a teacher at the school. Many schools prepare their students within the context of a weekly Philosophy Club which offers an opportunity for students to participate in Communities of Inquiry. Prior to the event teachers at each school collect their student's questions and email these to the organisers. These questions are collated and printed up within the program so that everyone has a copy on the night.

The topics for our first Philosothon were :

- Do human beings have free will?
- Does God exist?
- What is the nature of the human mind?
- Is it morally worse to actively kill a person than to passively allow that person to die?

We invited schools to send one student from each year level and a reserve. Students remain in year level groups for the first two Communities of Inquiry and then for the final two discussions students are mixed up at random. The rationale for mixing students up is based on the idea that Gifted and Talented students need to be provided with enrichment opportunities and are capable of thinking philosophically at levels beyond their age². All four students representing each school participate in each discussion with the reserve able to replace them on a maximum of two occasions. We invited each school to nominate a reserve as a way of covering someone who did not turn up on the night because of illness. It has, however, become a way of involving more students in the event. The reserve is only able to participate in a COI where they are replacing someone their own age or younger. The inclusion of reserves does cause problems when collating individual scores across as medals are awarded to individual students within age groups who achieve the highest score...but it does not affect the school marks as the reserve is simply replacing another student. Students are assigned to groups prior to the evening within these parameters.

Scores are assigned to individual students by judges who sit in on each discussion and these scores are used to work out team scores and individual scores on the evening. The judging panel consists of Philosophy lecturers from all the local universities. We also invite Phd Philosophy students to facilitate the discussions. Increasingly we have been able to utilise students who have participated in Philsothons while in their secondary years who are eager to be involved while studying at university. We usually pay our facilitators a nominal amount of \$200 each while the judges volunteer their time. The University sector is a vital ingredient in the success of this event. One of the many benefits of the Philosothon is the close connection it fosters with the tertiary sector which in Australian High School circles is all too often assumed to be an academic ivory tower.

All students receive a certificate at the end of the night to honour their selection. Medallions are also awarded to winning students (1st 2nd and 3rd place) in each age division and encouragement awards are given to the most promising male and female philosophers. These awards are determined by a Head judge and sponsored by various professional associations including the Australian Association of Philosophy (AAP). A magnificent crystal trophy with an image of Rodan's thinker embedded in it is awarded to the winning school on the evening. Medallions are also awarded to students whose school achieves second or third place on the night. From all reports the evening was a great success and the fact that those involved in the first Philosothon wanted to continue in the following year indicated that the event could be a regular feature in the calendar.

Some might say, and have said, that Philosophy cannot be undertaken in the context of a competition. They believe that by ranking individuals the process of a developing a Community of Inquiry is fundamentally compromised. I am not unsympathetic to this view, but my experience of these events contradicts this criticism. Interestingly many students forget they are involved in a competition and engage in the exact sort of investigation and collaboration we would hope to see in Philosophy and Ethics. In any case the same process is undertaken in any academic institution, tertiary or secondary where students are ranked against criteria. The only difference is that one of the more important criteria in a COI is collaboration. The following quote is interesting from a report on a recent Philosothon.

Everyone was working together to come up with the most intellectually sustainable understanding that they could. Another extraordinary thing was that although the Philosothon was a competition it hardly felt competitive at all. Students almost forgot that they were being judged against each other. The 'prize' for the students was just being in the discussions and being able to thrash out these things. A medal for winning was just the icing on the cake. Everybody walked out feeling like the proverbial winner³.

I am happy to live with this apparent contradiction as long as it remains the case that students recognise that wisdom is the ultimate goal and that they develop skills along the way in how to put together clear and constructive arguments

Each year since the first Philosothon the number of schools involved has grown. The second Philosothon in 2008 had twelve schools involved and in 2009 we had eighteen schools involved in the third Annual Philosothon. Twenty two schools participated in the fourth Philosothon and twenty four in the fifth Philosothon in 2011. Thirty schools are currently booked in for the 2012 Hale School Philosothon. Following each Philosothon we have asked for a written feedback from the judges and facilitators. These reports have resulted in many important developments to improve the event such as improvements in scoring procedure, marking keys, training for facilitators and changes in the structure of the evening.

In 2010 we decided to promote the event in other Australian states. I visited each state and ran workshops for teachers on how to conduct a Community of Inquiry and how to run a Philosothon.

These workshops were well attended and within a few years other Australian states were conducting their own annual Philosothon in each major capital city. This year eighteen schools participated in the Sydney Philosothon and eight schools participated in the Victorian Philosothon hosted by Ballarat Grammar School. A.B. Paterson College in Queensland hosts the Brisbane Philosothon and eighteen teams participated in their second Philosothon in 2011. In 2012 the first South Australian Philosothon will be held.

In 2011 the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA) agreed to host the first National Philosothon. The FAPSA Australasian Philosothon took place at Cranbrook School in Sydney in July 2011. The work involved in setting this up was phenomenal (including food and accommodation, judges and facilitators from the other side of the country) but in the end it was very worthwhile. Each state sent their best three teams (those

schools that won the 2010 Philosothon in each state) and so twelve schools in total arrived in Sydney to participate in the inaugural event. This was a three day event consisting of speakers, games and Communities of Inquiries over three days. Again leading academics awarded points to students on the basis of their ability to construct an argument collaboratively on interesting philosophical and ethical issues. There was an overwhelming sense that we had participated in something important and seminal. After the Philosothon we received feedback from students: "It was great to talk to such thoughtful people!" "I learnt so much and everyone was so friendly!" "I Loved Everything!" and "A fantastic Experience".

The feedback from all involved has been extremely positive. Many people have commented on the quality of the discussions and the following email, sent by one of the judges, is not untypical.

I would like to thank you and everyone else involved in the Philosothon last evening for such an enjoyable and enlightening evening. It was truly wonderful. My experience here at Notre Dame is, of course, with tertiary students and I have been impressed in recent times to see that the 'self-centred' image that the media presents of youth today is ill founded. Last night, listening to the Year 8s (13 year olds) expound their ideas of the 'Good life', I was amazed and delighted to hear them progress (self-propelled) from the benefits of wealth to the greater benefits of altruism. As was so rightly said by the School Headmaster "the future is in very safe hands". Where I come from there is an old, rustic saying which I thought appropriate for the experience of the proceedings "if you could bottle it and sell it you would make a fortune"! Thank you, indeed, and if required be sure that I would be delighted to attend next year.

In 2012 the second National Philosothon was held at Bond University and AB Paterson College on the Gold Coast. This involved twenty schools from around the country, two age divisions and teams of eight students from each school. Hale School won this event and took home the trophy to Western Australia. In 2013 the national Philosothon was held at Ballarat Grammar in Melbourne Victoria. This event was won by Raffles School for girls in Singapore with Wesley College in Perth coming second.

Also in 2012 the first Primary School Philosothon was held in Melbourne in 2012. The National Gallery of Victoria and the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools (VAPS) has invited schools to apply for the inaugural Victorian Primary School Philosothon. Ten students from eight schools will participate in three 30 minutes 'Communities of Inquiry' sessions; these will be held in front of a variety of artworks at the National Gallery. The event is open to students in Years 4, 5 and 6 and schools will be asked to choose two students from each of the year levels and extra student who will act as a reserve. This format was replicated in WA and was a wonderful success with 10 schools involved.

Another recent development has been the Ethics Olympiad which was first on Saturday 1/6/2013 and it was a great success. Hale School from Perth Western Australia competed against Austin HS in Tennessee and then competed against Bentley College in California. We used video conferencing technology in the first round and then Google + in the second round. Frankly the latter worked surprisingly well. Judges for this event included judges in Australia and in the US. The Aussie judges included Dr Laura D'Olimpio Philosophy lecturer at Notre Dame University and Chairperson of the Association for Philosophy in Schools and Dr Alan Tapper, Philosophy Lecturer at Curtin University co-author of the Senior Secondary text Philosophy and Ethics. In the States the judges included Dr. Don Olive, the Chair of Philosophy and Dean of Humanities at Carson-Newman College and John McClellan who teaches at Carson-Newman College.

The topics under discussion were :

- Is it moral to kill Mary so Jodie can live?
- Should the Red Cross/Red Crescent offer assistance to the Taliban?
- In what circumstances is it moral for a person to use secretive phone apps to keep track of another's whereabouts?
- Is Peter Singers proposed cap-and-trade system a moral way to address climate change?

The competition was based on a structure in the US called an Ethics Bowl. I recently observed the first National US High Ethics Bowl as a result of a scholarship I was awarded to visit the US and the UK during the last holidays. The Ethics Olympiad had the same excitement and gravitas as this amazing event. For the record Hale won the first round convincingly against Austin HS Tennessee and this gave us confidence for the second round. We found ourselves facing a formidable team from Bentley California and we managed a draw. Dr Matt Deaton from the University of Tennessee did a wonderful job moderating the discussions from the US and Simon Kidd from Australia helped as an assistant moderator at this end.

The students in Australia found the cases very stimulating and the comment made to me at the end was that they loved the opportunity to work as a team. This was the best thing we have ever done as a school and these boys will remember this experience for the rest of their lives. More information about the ethics Olympiad can be found at www.ethicsolympiad.org

- Exchanges ideas and builds on the ideas of others e.g. students use ordinary questions to help build exam
- 10 - Identifies some core issues and concepts in the stimulus materials e.g. stu
- 12 Identifies the consequences of an action in a given context e.g. students e
- Simplistic / limited engagement with questions / peers in light of the stimulus materials, e.g. students need
- 5 - 9 Limited interpretation and explanation of the stimulus materials e.g. stude
- 1 - 4 Asks rhetorical questions and/or disjointed questions/answers to stimulus material/issues/peer question
- Mere assertions about stimulus materials / issues / peer questioning e.g. students make claims with no re
- 0 Dominates / monopolises the inquiry e.g. students need to treat peers properly and need to contribute to

(1) Professor Lipman was the founder of the Philosophy for Children movement (P4C) at Montclair State College in New Jersey.

(2) The majority of Gifted and Talented pull-out programs include an assortment of critical thinking drills, creative exercises, and subjects typically not introduced in standard curriculums. Much of the material introduced in pull-out programs deal with the study of Logic, and its application to fields ranging from Philosophy to Mathematics. See the Wikipedia Article on Gifted and Talented http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gifted_education#Pull-Out.

(3) Part of a report by Colin Redmond - Notre Dame university.