

Afrique du Sud - Philosophy with Children : bringing critical thinking into Soweto township schools

Sven Gliettenberg is a passionate teacher who visited us at CERT. Here he tells us more about his work and his experience with critical thinking workshops by Isabelle Millon, co-founder of the Institute of Philosophical Practice based in France

Please tell us a little about yourself and the work you do

I am a Grade 9 English First Additional Language (FAL) teacher working at Thaba Jabula Secondary School in Klipspruit, Soweto. I began teaching in 2013 at a semi-rural township school in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria. I am passionate about improving my own classroom practice by learning from and collaborating with other teachers both from South Africa and other countries. I am convinced that the truly powerful changes to our education system, and the society as a whole, will begin in the classrooms and be led by the learners and teachers of township schools.

How did you hear about The Institute of Philosophical Practice?

I met Isabelle Millon at a Philosophy for Children conference in Cape Town, two years ago. During a plenary discussion, I made the point that I felt the conference was not adequately speaking to the realities and needs of the average South African school. Isabelle approached me afterwards and encouraged me to take part in a critical thinking workshop she was offering at the conference. After attending and enjoying her workshop, I then arranged for her to organise a workshop with students at a friend's school in Soweto on her way back to France. The workshop was so successful that she promised to come back and work in South Africa again.

What is The Institute of Philosophical Practice?

The Institute of Philosophical Practice was started in order to train people in philosophy grounded in everyday life. This is to lay the basis for organising critical thinking workshops in various places around the world. The idea of a critical thinking workshop is to collectively examine our ideas and ways of thinking in an intimate atmosphere. You learn to ask and respond to questions, problematise, conceptualise and to confront your assumptions and beliefs. These workshops take the form of rigorously structured group discussions led by a facilitator.

Why did you think your students would be interested or benefit from such a programme?

A few things about the way that these workshops are facilitated convinced me that my learners would benefit from them. Firstly, everyone takes part. This is because it is not about knowledge or the ability to use language very well, but more about thinking. Every person can and must be fully engaged at all times during the workshop. The space that the facilitator creates is such that nobody is allowed to dominate and every person feels safe enough to contribute. The idea is to understand and

analyse people's ideas, whether you agree with them or not. Indeed, even if it is only for the duration of the workshop, real equality within the group becomes a reality. If anyone needs help or doesn't understand something, they quickly learn that they have the responsibility to ask questions, and they do. The usage of different languages is welcomed. The most important thing is that everybody really listens and tries to understand each other and engages seriously with their own thinking and the thinking of others. People learn to separate themselves from their ideas and enjoy the challenges, problems and differences between them.

When did you have the first workshop?

In September this year Isabelle and a colleague, Waseem Abbas from Palestine, offered successful critical thinking workshops for seven schools around Johannesburg. The first few workshops were at my school and some other schools in and around Soweto. They also offered a few workshops in Vosloorus and Katlehong, east of Gauteng.

How did it go? What has been the reaction of your students?

Most of the workshops went extremely well. All of them were rich learning experiences for both the facilitators and learners, as well as the teachers who were observing. Students were challenged to do things they don't usually do. Many students who never speak in class - who perhaps haven't spoken once the whole year - let their voices and ideas be heard for the first time. Other students who often dominate class discussion were challenged as well, for the first time, to really listen to their classmates instead of being so consumed by their own ideas.

Some workshops were uncomfortable and tense, but in a completely unfamiliar way. Even these workshops helped the learners and teachers become more conscious of the deep rifts and counter-productive communication habits which had solidified over time. There was a whole host of different reactions from learners, mostly overwhelmingly positive, but always intense. Even those learners who did not enjoy the workshops did so passionately and could still see some value in the experience. With one particularly enthusiastic group, some learners had grasped the techniques so well after only a few hours of working with Isabelle that they actually took over the responsibility of facilitating the workshop themselves!

How has the workshops impacted your teaching? Will you be having more workshops in the future?

Myself and some of the other teachers who had the workshops in their schools continue to apply some of the questioning and facilitating methodology we observed. For example, every time I give instructions, I check if they understand by asking somebody in the class to repeat the instructions in their own words. If there is some confusion or if they have left something out or if they simply can't, they must ask someone else in the class to help. In this way I let them become more accountable for their own understanding. I let them do the work of clarifying for each other, explaining or translating

so that everybody understands. This is something that they can do better than I can anyway. Slowly, the learners are beginning to listen to each other and me more carefully. They are able to speak with more clarity and conviction and, most importantly, ask questions when they do not understand. In terms of formal workshops, we plan to have Isabelle and Waseem back next year to engage in 2-3 weeks of intensive teacher training and workshop facilitation in schools, businesses and social organisations.

There are what some of my students had to say about the workshops:

"It kept my mind running and opened what was in my chest" - Muzi, Grade 11, Erasmus Monareng High School, Vosloorus "Today we tried to understand other people's decisions and we had some disagreements, but we solved them and understood. The workshop was so enjoyable and I have learned on how to speak in front of other people." - Simphiwe, Grade 10, Zonkizizwe High School, Katlehong

"I like what you said, it makes us to think deep about everything in both sides like good or bad, no matter the situation is. It also helps us to know that everyone have good ideas, you just don't have to be scared on whether is good or wrong because we could discuss it as a group and strategise." - Sinalo, Grade 11, Thaba Jabula Secondary School, Soweto

"I like the session because I managed to learn a lot. I didn't know much about critical thinking, how to think critically. I always answered with a maybe, not sure or in between or it depends and thought that I have answered the question. To think critically is to be on both sides, share facts and opinions but at the end of the day, weigh them and get a solution. To think creative or critically was never easy but it is worth it." - Mzwandile, Grade 11, Thaba Jabula Secondary School, Soweto

What else would you like to emphasise/highlight?

The reality is that there is very little or no encouragement to teach or create a thinking culture - critical or otherwise - in many of our country's schools. This applies to public, Model C or private schools. What there is a lot of - from both learners and educators - is blind, unquestioning acceptance of the status quo that eventually leads to a lack of productive engagement with the needs of our society to progress. Also there are many educators who stubbornly insist on doing things the way they have always been done.

This comes at a cost borne by learners. They are the ones who get beaten for it, or fail and drop out of school. Some even graduate and end up perpetuating this outlook. Our entire society inevitably ends up suffering from the wasted potential as a result of this lack of critical thinking, learning and engagement with learners. Nevertheless, I am convinced that, with the proper support, teachers can apply some of the simple, practical tools learnt at these critical thinking workshops. Therefore, we

can make some small but powerful adjustments to the way we manage our classrooms and schools. We can turn our classrooms into spaces where all learners :

- feel safe and empowered to express themselves and to ask questions when they don't understand;
- listen to each other, clarify each other's thoughts and offer translations and extra explanations when they are needed;
- speak clearly and taking responsibility for their ideas; and
- understand each other despite their differences and have the patience to work through their disagreements.

Starting from our own classrooms, we teachers can and must lead the change, so that our learners can become the responsible, capable, thinking citizens that our country needs. Critical thinking is an essential tool in education that can empower our learners and help lead them towards becoming more effective citizens, who are more able to offer working solutions to help our communities' progress.