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Drama and Philosophy: Language, Thinking and Laughing Out Loud!

Introduction

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is beneficial for children who love thinking out loud and asking 'why?' In my work in the Wordplay Drama and Literacy program, this strategy is employed at The Biscuit Factory Arts Centre in South Fremantle. Dr Josephine Fantasia and I have organised and facilitated two philosophy workshops for children from Kindergarten to Year 10 levels. These workshops were offered during the 2003 school holidays as an extension of the current classes held at The Biscuit Factory. This practical investigation into the method in Wordplay focuses on the creative and artistic implementation of these ideas. I outline how these workshops were organised, their outcomes and how they have enabled primary children, in particular, to use philosophical thought through creative and critical thinking. I shall demonstrate that, without requiring a lot of extra effort or training, this method is easy to facilitate in the classroom. I also argue that philosophy is useful and practical for children, teaching them essential thinking skills. Emphasising drama and the visual arts, along with the employment of current technologies, makes Philosophy for Children relevant, interesting, creative and fun.

Through the examination of stories, drama, images and ideas, children are encouraged to explore their own questions as well as those of others. Philosophy, in conjunction with arts-based learning, offers young people the opportunity to communicate to their friends and communities in a variety of ways: through live performance, video and audio recordings, as well as visual mediums. The focus is on a creative journey whereby new times and places are discovered and an adventure is created which often leads to unexpected discoveries, unfamiliar sights and strange sounds. The focus is on each person's need to find their own voice and make their own meaning. This is wonderfully compatible with philosophy, which aims at exploring questions and ideas of one's own while also comparing and contrasting these to those of others.

Thinking and literacy skills are honed by making these workshops consciously philosophical, and putting the focus on making meaning. The child is encouraged to learn in a creative and fun manner through the interest generated in the stories and their dramatisation, along with other activities. Making use of the creative arts as a medium for the exploration and expression of ideas assists the generation of interest and promotes improved communication skills.

We started the workshops with a series of problem-solving activities and get-to-know-you games centred on the notion of questioning. Questions are crucial to the thoughtful mind; many philosophers would argue that they are even more important than the answers, as Howard Gardner (2004) argues. To ask questions is important as a practical tool that assists us in life: it is the way we process information, discover new information, and expose any problems with arguments or ideas. To introduce this topic to the children, we showed a series of images that were taken from the Wearable Arts Festival, which is held annually in Nelson, New Zealand. The Wearable Arts display their entries in a theatrical, fashion-show production that incorporates music, lighting and choreography. Prizes are given for the best creations. We asked the children to think of any questions, besides 'What is it?', that they would ask *about* the object or *to* the object. The intention behind this activity is to generate lots of different kinds of questions, not to answer them. We shall see that some of these questions may have answers and some may not, and some may have many answers.

These questions can then be placed into conversations that we would have with each other or with a creature from the images. They provide us with a framework that enables us to place the creature within a context and find out more information about the creature, which informs us with regard to our interaction with and relation to this creature. For example, the children were asked to act out their meeting with the creature at a bus stop, or in a crowded shopping centre. These scenarios allow for improvised conversations to take place between the imaginary creature/s and the children, allowing us to examine some of the assumptions we might make when talking to others. For example, we may assume that this creature speaks English, or that it knows that it is on the planet Earth. It is interesting to see how the conversations and questions change when these assumptions aren't made, or different assumptions inform our inquiry.

Some of the questions the children raised after seeing these images included questions about the specific parts or colours of the object, where and why it was made, and what it was made from. This shows that they were trying to relate it to something they could understand, and often they looked at the parts before making a prediction about the whole. Practical, emotive and design questions were among

the different types of questions asked, demonstrating that the children were relating to different aspects of the image - parts that may be important to their interaction with this creature. This exploration of different perspectives becomes more apparent when we look at the exercise that followed this activity.

We discussed our questions in pairs and small groups, and then we acted out the questions that would be generated if the creature were to suddenly appear in front of us - by the creature, as well as by ourselves or other bystanders. This was philosophically interesting as it looked at the notion of differing points of view, and the children were asking questions from the point of view of the creature as if the creature knew nothing about our world. Asking these sorts of questions involves examining our assumptions. The questions we would ask of each other as human beings who share common assumptions are different from those asked of a creature that may be from another planet. Some of the questions the children asked included: 'What are you doing in *my* world?' and 'Where do you come from?' These sorts of questions involve ideas of ownership and of placing the self and the creature in a context, allowing difference to be examined.

Using the philosophical games for children and then acting out their ideas through the creative arts are relevant to education as they allow children to explore meanings and examine their definitions of self in a non-threatening way. This understanding of a sense of self is a crucial aspect of a human being's existence. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) provide support for this in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*.

We are philosophical animals. We are the only animals we know of who can ask, and sometimes even explain, why things happen the way they do. We are the only animals who ponder the meaning of their existence and who worry constantly about love, sex, work, death, and morality. And we appear to be the only animals that can reflect critically on their lives in order to make changes in how they behave.

Philosophy matters to us, therefore, primarily because it helps us to make sense of our lives and to live better lives. A worthwhile philosophy will be one that gives us deep insight into who we are, how we experience the world, and how we ought to live.

At the heart of our quest for meaning is our need to know ourselves - who we are, how our mind works, what we can and cannot change, and what is right and wrong. (1999: 551)

The questioning by these children demonstrates their examination of themselves within their environment and what is or is not 'normal', 'acceptable' or relevant to them. I have demonstrated that this process can be assisted by drama games and techniques, some of which are described here. These activities help them to create meaning as they fill out and inform *their* notions of self. Thus these activities can help children to prepare for life.

If we reflect upon Lakoff and Johnson's point about the indispensable nature of philosophy for human beings, it appears that we *all* - children included - make meanings in these ways. This is seen when we form our self-identities, communicate with others and think in general, yet it appears that the majority of people do not realise that they are, in fact, philosophising. 'Who am I, really?' is a philosophical question. So are the questions 'What am I good at doing?', 'What do I enjoy doing?' and 'What is the right thing to do?', as the answers to *these* questions help inform our self-identity. Thus we may be thinking philosophically by analysing our skills and interests when we are, for example, applying for a job or writing our resume - as we ask questions about what kind of work will suit us, and whether or not it is worthwhile and valuable. Our conversations with others after we've just seen an interesting movie may be philosophical. We seem to philosophise far more often than we realise, and it really is of practical value. During the philosophy workshops, when the children were engaged in imaginative and creative activities, many philosophically interesting topics emerged. To use the Philosophy for Children terminology, a *community of inquiry* was created among the children and me.

Laurance Splitter and Ann M. Sharp refer to the classroom as a community of philosophical inquiry whereby thinking can be taught and improved. The American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) first used the term 'Community of Inquiry' to refer to scientists talking to each other. Peirce promoted the idea of Fallibilism: that knowledge is always more or less uncertain due to the endless possibilities of interpretation. John Dewey (1859-1952) then adopted the term 'Community of Inquiry' and advocates of P4C credit him with the background theory of Philosophy for Children. Dewey's philosophy argues that the world isn't *readily* meaningful, and it can only be made meaningful through intelligent experimental inquiry (cited in Lipman, 2002). It is *this* sort of inquiry that advocates of P4C would like to see in the classroom.

Splitter and Sharp (1995) characterise thinking as 'mental activity of any kind: internal dialogue,

imagining, dreaming, deducing, wandering, etc.' (1995: 7). They believe that improving thinking helps us to have better judgment in our lives, and that the nature of the process of inquiry tends to interweave these two elements of *thinking* and *making judgments* which are based on criteria and reasons. (1995: 13) Philosophy, therefore, can help one to think for oneself, which leads to freedom. This intellectual freedom can be seen to be a result of philosophical inquiry, as they note:

Thinking for oneself involves a search for more and more reliable criteria so that one's judgments can rest upon a firm and solid foundation. Those who think for themselves are able to formulate arguments and conclusions which support specific points of view. But they are also prepared to come up with new ideas and possibilities that may have nothing to do with arguments. As reflective thinkers, they are able to determine and control - to an extent at least - the nature and the course of their own thinking. (1995: 16)

I believe that advocates of P4C would encourage the progression of their idea from philosophical games and the examination and discussion of stories to a more arts-based exploration of children's thoughts and ideas. Matthew Lipman, in an interview given to *Critical & Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy for Children* in 2001, was asked what direction he would like the P4C curriculum to be developed in. His reply was: 'Wherever there is a specific educational need, there is a specific philosophical need.' Lipman also mentions that P4C doesn't rely on its novels and manuals for it to be put into practice. He states: 'The key words are "philosophical inquiry" . The teacher has to learn to think like a philosopher, in that she has to be able to connect questions that the class raises with the big philosophical questions of the tradition.' (2001: 49-50) This encourages and provides an opportunity for teachers to share their curiosity with their students.

Exploring the children's ideas is more important than emerging with the one absolutely correct answer. And, of course, many philosophers and the whole movement of constructivist educationalists question whether or not there can be such answers. Splitter and Sharp note: 'As products of inquiry, they are still part of the ongoing process. Indeed, there is a real sense in which the process of thinking and the making of judgements are interwoven at each step'.(1995: 13) This indicates that thoughts aren't usually set in stone. In everyday life, we witness the changing of opinions when we learn more facts about a situation or gather more evidence through further research. This is the way the mind works: it is open to interpretation and reinterpretation.

When we explore these ideas in our minds, using our imaginations to think creatively about our lives, beliefs and choices, aren't we staging mini-performances in our heads? We often imagine a scenario (or multiple scenarios) in order to make a decision, as this helps us to examine possible outcomes and thus decide how to act. Likewise, before a performance, presentation or sometimes a discussion with another, we may visualise it so that we can be clear about what we need to say or do when the time arrives. This hints at the value of drama techniques that can be used with children in order to encourage them to think philosophically. These techniques and drama games are tools that can be used in the education of children when teaching philosophy, and the skills learnt are transferable to everyday life. Encouraging the use of our imaginations helps us to make moral decisions and understand others' points of view. Drama actively assists the development of our imaginations. Through the use of stories that promote their interest, children's imaginations can be exercised in such a way that, when it comes to their involvement in the real world, they will be able to think for themselves. If they can learn to challenge ideas in a constructive and creative manner, they can - to a certain extent - be in control of their understanding of their world, and their involvement in it.

Children can be seen to have the freedom to explore different interpretations when they are in a suitable environment, such as the one provided by the classroom as a community of inquiry. Splitter and Sharp argue that this community 'evokes a spirit of co-operation, care, trust, safety, and a sense of common purpose - and inquiry' (1995: 18). As I will demonstrate, this was evident during our workshops and the result was individualistic thinking as the children felt the freedom to explore their *own* ideas and they were *interested* enough to do so as we presented the subjects creatively. Through the arts-based activities, the children could use their imaginations to explore topics and hone their thinking skills through different media, and then express these in a way that they felt reflected *them* and their ideas.

Our workshops helped children to learn through arts media such as drama, writing, drawing, movement, and set design and construction. It is in this way that children with different learning styles can *all* benefit from the material presented in the philosophy workshop. This method of teaching is compatible with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. A benefit that emerges from this type of philosophical exploration, through the artistic exploration of literature or by philosophical inquiry games, is the tolerance for difference that it encourages. I found that these activities levelled the playing field in that the sports enthusiast and the book lover can find common ground as they might both have a similar

interest in, for example, outer space or aliens.

The conversations that can arise from similar questions can be philosophically interesting, such as: 'Is there life on other planets?' The focus on inquiry allows two people to arrive at a similar conclusion to a problem even if they have different reasons for their result. There is often no 'wrong', and usually there are other informative aspects to be taken into consideration when coming up with an answer. An example of this, in relation to an ethical question, is doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. In this situation, the outcome may be the same yet the morality of the act is questioned if it has been done for selfish reasons such as acting out of a desire for fame and fortune. These types of discussions about arguments, reasoning, logical statements and supporting ideas emerge as children are encouraged to respect differences in thought and each other's points of view without putting others down.

The philosophical exploration of a story encourages the child to 'go deeply' into the story and elaborately process the information they find. The structure of philosophical thought enables one to tease out the different ideas, as well as the cultural assumptions that the text makes, and look at these aspects objectively. Philosophy allows a detailed reading of art forms due to the structure it provides. As drama does the same thing, combining the two allows for philosophy to be engaging and, as the students engage with the stories, they are *interested* in the stories and the philosophical issues and questions explored in the text. This promotes excitement about literacy as well as stimulating creative thought.

Gardner (2001) states:

I bet you could teach about the Civil War using dance – I thought about the Spanish Civil War and the painting 'Guernica'. And I said I bet you more people understand more about the Spanish Civil War from Picasso's 'Guernica' than from reading the textbook on the topic. Almost anything can be illuminated in surprising ways if you open up your mind to the variety of intelligences.

Where is it said that the only way to learn about something is to read a chapter on it and answer a set of short-answer questions? – people who were better students, who had more of a liberal arts education, understand that the questions we ask are more important than the answers we come up with, and the more ways that we can think about something, the deeper our understanding is. (2001: 56)

This thinking that aids understanding is precisely why philosophy is useful and the questions that the children are asking are so important. Some questions lead you to a certain answer and, if you want people to think for themselves, it is important to recognise this and look at the other possible answers to that question. Drama is particularly useful in this regard, as it allows children to take on a character, and in this way explore a perspective different from their own. If we're interested in a free society, as Splitter and Sharp (1995) point out, intellectual freedom is of paramount importance and thinking for oneself should be encouraged. A society full of creative thinkers will not result in a rebellious, non-conformist lawless group of people but rational and intelligent human beings who can make truly democratic decisions and realise that these decisions involve ethics. It is in *this* way that philosophy can lead to a *true* freedom.

While most people are familiar with Gardner's comments, they are excitingly realised by the application of philosophy through the creative and visual arts. I would like to share with you now a little of the proceedings of the drama and philosophy workshops. We divided into small groups and looked at a few of Aesop's fables from different cultures. Each group was given a series of chopped-up sentences and they had to put them together in a jigsaw-like fashion to create the story. The children read the story and then acted it out after firstly creating their 'set' from chairs and coloured materials; some made use of masks to assist their narration.

The children were then asked to watch each performance and discuss the story, its values and morals, analysing the different perspectives and values offered by the different characters. The groups were then asked to change an aspect of their story and look at whether or not the ethics of the story would change if the characters, the context or the scenario changed. These versions of the stories were also performed and discussions ensued comparing the original set of morals with those of their own versions of the stories. It was discovered that often the messages remained the same and the reasons the children came up with to explain this phenomena were insightful and intelligent. Finally, they were asked to write a story about the central notion in their fables.

Lachlan, an eight-year-old boy, examined and performed the story of 'The Boatman'. In the original version of this fable from the Middle East, the scholar asks the boatman if he has any education. On being told 'no', the scholar informs the boatman that he has wasted most of his life. The tables are turned when the boat starts to sink and it is revealed that the scholar, so busy studying, never learnt to swim.

The boatman informs the scholar that he has wasted *all* of his life. Lachlan then changed this story so that it became a story of a limousine driver and a movie star. The limousine driver had to go to hospital, leaving the movie star to find her own way to her performance, but she couldn't drive. Finally the driver returns to take the star to her performance, but the star is too late. The moral of the story remains the same in both instances: the skills that are most often praised may not be the most useful, and it isn't ethical to brag about one's abilities. Lachlan then generalised this theme and wrote the story of a Know-All, which goes as follows:

An evil man, hated by all, has a spell put on him when the town becomes tired of him. This spell turns him into an uncontrollable bird who must do good deeds. One day the spell reverses when he does something really nice and he is thanked for it. He becomes human again and he has magical powers that have lingered from the spell. He sees all and knows all in the universe. He doesn't use TV because he watches it in his mind and he sees someone commended for their magical powers so he tells everyone about his. At this very moment a storm occurs and the power robs him of his abilities and, as a result, everyone thinks that he is a liar. The town's people torture him because he's thought to be a liar and he dies.

The moral of this story is the same as the two previous versions of the fable, yet interestingly, the story is told from the perspective of the Know-All as opposed to solely that of the majority. There is some sympathy for this character, as no one believes him when he does tell the truth, yet it's also realised that no one likes a know-all or braggart.

Another activity that we conducted during the workshops involved examining the story of 'The Princess and the Pea', by Hans Christian Andersen, and treating this story in different ways. The parents and friends of the children involved in the workshops were invited to come half an hour before they were due to pick up their children and watch the play or scenes that had emerged as a result of the philosophical exploration of some ideas centred around the concept of a princess and the notion of a test.

We introduced the questioning of the concept of a princess to the children through a drama game, Present-giving, that allowed the exploration of expectations. The children sat in a circle and held an imaginary present that they had decided to give to the princess. Without telling the next person what this present was, they passed it to them. The next person might be able to guess what the present was by the body language of the present-giver, but they also had their own idea as to what the gift *should be*, and this might or might not correspond to that of the gift-giver. Examples of presents given included a crown, a dress or a doll. The presents reflected what the child thought the princess might like, what a princess should have, or what the children themselves valued. The discussion that ensued reflected the fact that this game explores philosophical notions of assumptions, expectations and differing points of view. For example, when carrying the imaginary present in a delicate and careful manner, the child receiving this present would guess that it was a breakable or precious gift. The children also discussed the notion of what it means to be a 'real' princess, and whether or not this can be learnt - if 'normal' people can go to princess school and become princesses. This allowed for the examination and analysis of *seen* versus *unseen* characteristics of princesses, such as manners, family, dress, values and even personality. It was interesting to ask where these concepts came from - be it the media, real life or fairytales. These discussions covered the philosophical idea of definitions and concepts while also examining notions of exclusivity and 'belonging'.

The play the children performed for their family and friends was a culmination of the children's ideas about princesses and tests. They constructed their own characters, their lines, their actions and their costumes centred on the main concept they had been exploring. The moral that emerged was based on the stereotypical fairytale notion of good and evil, but the inquiry had taken place as to whether or not this is realistic and if it would be possible and/or likely in the real world. The philosophical inquiry and the drama games played had provided an opportunity to delve deeply into the concepts behind a seemingly simple fairytale and its moral message.

The children, throughout the course of the workshops, had examined whether or not they agreed with the moral of the story, and whether stereotypes could be useful or harmful. Interestingly, though, all of these ideas were not immediately evident in the final performance piece. Perhaps inherent in the nature of being a play for an audience is the idea of it being a 'finished' product; this differs from the result of philosophical inquiry, which often leaves you with more questions than answers or unresolved ideas and further inquiry. Perhaps, as an avenue for further research and the development of the association between drama and philosophy, there is a need to examine which forms of theatre best suit the portrayal of philosophical ideas and display the process of questioning that has preceded the final performance. However, I feel that the performing that accompanies the 'working out' and thinking about the philosophical ideas - particularly those contained in texts - has proved valuable throughout the workshop

process. We demonstrated to the parents that these thought processes had occurred by engaging them, along with the children, in a philosophical discussion about the play's central notions after they had seen the performance.

Thus I have demonstrated that Philosophy for Children can be used as one way in which children are encouraged to express themselves in a creative manner that appeals to them. By linking philosophy with drama, the children's imaginations are stimulated and interest is generated by the dramatic engagement with the stories and philosophical ideas contained there. Placing value on the children's individual strengths and giving them the confidence to know that their ideas and thoughts are worthwhile is a great thing to be able to do. The practical skills that are associated with this, such as decision-making skills, communication and logical thought, will also help them in real-life situations. As I have demonstrated, this method is easy to manage in the classroom without requiring a lot of extra effort. Philosophy is useful and practical for children, teaching them essential thinking skills. With our emphasis on drama and the visual arts, along with the employment of current technologies, Philosophy for Children, combined with arts-based learning, is practical as well as fun.

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