

Doing Philosophy in High School: One Teacher's Account

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The Context: Elders, Students, Teachers

In the fall of 1998 I was given the opportunity to teach a one-semester philosophy class in a small, rural high school on the island of Maui, Hawaii. At one time the area was a thriving sugar cane plantation with a functioning mill and a population of nearly 30,000. Today, most of the 2,000 people left are subsistence farmers, flower growers, county and state workers, or support staff for the luxury hotel or the ranch. The landscape is lush; much of it grows as jungle. The community is comprised primarily of Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians, all of whom are economically challenged. There are a few wealthy families-drawn to the location by its breath-taking beauty and by its remote location-and some of these send their children to the local public school. Additionally, in the early 1970s this area was a haven for Caucasian, mainland hippies and back-to-the-landers, many of whose children now attend the high school. Finally, there are some students of Filipino and Japanese descent. The school, then, is uniquely diverse, even for Hawaii.

Rather than supporting formal education as a means of self-improvement, some parents and grandparents fear that it will take their children and grandchildren away from them. The educated person, finding no opportunities for work, will have to move to cities outside of the community. These elders have a view of the world that differs fundamentally from traditional Western thought. They have been witnesses to the erosion of their cultural traditions. They see their children turning away from the land and the sea-resources the elders regard as an integral part of their survival and heritage. School takes so much time that their children cannot work routinely in the taro

fields. Often, this very real threat to their traditional ways is thought to be a direct result of Western, compulsory education.

Most of the students in this small school have grown up together, and they all know one another quite well. Small town life and the cultural value placed on communal relationships result in there being a familial sense among these students, even in the classroom. This does not necessarily translate into caring relationships. On the contrary, there are frequent sibling-like flare-ups among the students. Their stories are so intertwined it is frequently difficult for an outsider to decode the student interaction. Although a few of them are academically proficient, even scholarly, historically, the majority of these students have been academically unmotivated. Instead of school, they excel at ocean sports: surfing, boogie boarding, canoe paddling, and fishing. Many students hunt the local wild pigs together, and some students do work long hours in the taro patches or on the flower farms when they are not in school. After the sun goes down, many of the students gather on the beach or along the deserted jungle roads to drink and socialize. Some smoke marijuana, a few do crack and cocaine. Among these young islanders, homework is frowned upon as an unfair imposition on an otherwise idyllic existence. Their interest in preserving this unique lifestyle thus overlaps considerably with the concern of their elders to preserve their cultural integrity.

The majority of these students plan to stay in the community, where the only economic advantage of a high school diploma is that it gives them a chance at the county jobs. Apart from that, the relevance of their public school education to the reality of their

lives in this community is not apparent to many. And so for most of them, the diploma is all they want from their high school experience. A "D" or better in any class is fine. They have three years to pass the Hawaii State Test of Essential Competencies, required for graduation, and they can be coached on the areas that they must retake. I found very little acknowledgement on the part of students that these state requirements reflected important life skills. Most of my students looked at their public education as a thing imposed upon them, disconnected from their personal and cultural needs—an unpleasant necessity to be endured.

Of course, there are some students who see their education as the ticket out of this small town. They are motivated to learn as much as they can, to take advantage of as many educational opportunities as possible, including e-school, and they demand better teaching and more diverse course offerings. In some ways these few keep the school alert, preventing it from falling prey to the apathy which is otherwise so prevalent.

The teachers who staff the school are yet another dimension that deserves mention. Because the community is remote and small, teachers tend either to stay for the balance of their careers or to leave after a year. Those who are there for life have property and family ties, which allow them to live comfortably. Those who come in from the outside usually have problems with loneliness after a few months. Many of them drive to the "other side" of the island as often as possible to socialize, thus are accentuating their detachment from the community. From time to time there are those who commute to the community from the "other side," but they don't last long. The commute is at least an hour and a half each way on a narrow, winding road that has frequent mud and rock slides. The result of these factors is a perpetual teacher shortage. While most of the teachers in this high school have Bachelor's degrees, some do not have any teaching credentials. And so, out of necessity, more than half of the staff is teaching in areas for which

they have no qualifications.

Many teachers who stay do so because of the relaxed environment. A few bring this "laid back" attitude to school by behaving in ways that would be totally unacceptable in any other school on Maui. For example, one teacher wears very casual clothes and no shoes to school, but expects her students to wear appropriate footwear for her classes and actually gives them demerits when they don't! Others openly drink and smoke marijuana at parties where their students are present. The relaxed attitude can be observed in classrooms as well, in lax classroom management and an unwillingness to enforce school-wide procedures.

With apathetic students, unqualified teachers, and many parents who either do not support education philosophically, or don't have the time to give practical support, the school climate is less than optimal. Some students show common courtesies like acknowledging you with a smile or a nod or even an occasional "good morning." Most do not, even though they know you from classes and by all accounts, appear to like you in the context of the classroom. Foul language, rudeness, disrespectful behavior, and disregard for the other, are the norm. The "Aloha Spirit" is reserved for specific events and contexts. There are many explanations for the school environment, some obvious and some contestable. However, for the purpose of this story, it is not necessary to explore them all.

The Course

It was during my second year in this high school that I was able to teach the philosophy course. I knew nearly every student. Their work was superficial, shallow. Even the brightest and best exhibited a lack of excellence. Most students had told me they were content with Ds and Cs. They just wanted to get through, to "grad, finally."

The students who took my course expected to learn about Socrates and Plato and were a bit surprised to find that we were going to be "doing" philosophy-learning about philosophy as we involved ourselves

in dialogue about their own philosophical questions and concerns. They did not think that they had anything of value to offer philosophically and had serious doubts about any kind of requirement for participation in discussion, saying, "No, Miss G., we never like say not'ing. We shame...." I found that I had to push them gently and subtly or they would balk. Intrinsic motivation was lacking and they chastised me for not giving them candy and rewards. On the first day of the philosophy class one student, whom I will call "Punahale," expressed her disdain for doing any "deep thinking," saying that, "This better not be one of those courses, you know, the kind where you have to really think about something. That's too hard on the brain." I simply said, "We'll see."

I planned the course using the following objectives as guidelines:

1. To develop an understanding of the thinking processes of reasoning and logic and the ability to engage in thoughtful, reflective dialogue.
2. To develop and participate in a community of inquiry.
3. To utilize critical and creative thinking skills in a philosophical dialogue.
4. To cultivate respect and consideration for others in the community of philosophical inquiry.
5. To develop an awareness of metacognition and begin to foster skills in the critical examination of one's own thinking.

The parameters required by the state for a course in philosophy were broad enough to allow me quite a bit of freedom in designing the course. This was especially important since I didn't know quite what to expect the first year. This was the basic outline I used:

- I. Building Community
 - A. Respect
 - B. Creating an intellectually safe place
 - C. Sharing a common text

- II. Developing Tools for Thinking
 - A. Defining the problem
 1. Clarifying
 2. Looking for ambiguity
 - B. Giving good reasons
 - C. Identifying assumptions
 - D. Making inferences, looking at implications
 - E. Examining for truth of statements
 - F. Providing evidence, examples and counter-examples
- III. Recognizing and Developing Reasoning Skills
 - A. Questioning
 - B. Examining
 - C. Reflecting
 - D. Restructuring
 - E. Analyzing for Fallacy
 1. Dangers of generalization
 2. False presuppositions
 - F. Inquiring into ideas
 - G. Logic
 1. Syllogistic reasoning
 2. Aristotelian logic
- IV. Knowledge Building
 - A. Practicing critical thinking
 - B. Practicing creative thinking
 - C. Practicing caring thinking
 - D. Thinking about our thinking (metacognition)
 1. Ethical thinking (Normative and practical)
 2. Philosophy of the mind
 3. Epistemology

I had serious doubts about the abilities of these juniors and seniors as critical thinkers, mostly because of what I had observed and experienced in my other courses: minimal, last-minute effort, no studying before exams, and turning in the rough draft as the finished product. I knew it would be a difficult journey. I decided to begin by giving them the Cornell Critical Thinking Test, Level X, as a pre-test. This test contains items to measure inductive reasoning, judgments about credibility, deduction, and identification of assumptions. While the test is not

normed using large, national representative samples, it provides detailed information about specific groups who have taken the test and with whom there may be a basis for comparison. The reliability of the test ranges from .67 to .90 using both the "Spearman-Brown" and the "Kuder-Richardson" methods. The documentation contains a discussion supporting these indices to be an underestimation. The content validity is high.

The mean scores of other eleventh- and twelfth-grade high school groups who have taken the test ranged from 40.6 to 48.2 on a user norm table. With a mean score of 43.9, my students fell in the lower half, but were well above the bottom of the norm range. This was slightly surprising and very encouraging. I decided that I would use the same instrument as a post-test in January, at the end of the semester.

Establishing a semi-recognizable community of inquiry was no small task. Because of their sibling-like relationships, the students did not feel that they were in a consistently intellectually safe environment, where they could make statements without fear of put-downs or other repercussions. Certainly, this is a common difficulty in instigating philosophical dialogue anywhere among peers, especially adolescent peers. But this difficulty was exacerbated in my class by the fact that these students spent most of their time together outside of class. Their experience of the normal ups and downs of personal teen-aged relationships was intensified by their shared isolation. As I have indicated, their lives had been so intertwined for so long that any issue between them was bound to have a lifelong context. Their shared history gave their problems a familial depth. And so, on many days the class experienced a "presence" of something heavy and tense, which interfered with sincere dialogue.

We began our philosophical journey with the Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan philosophical novel, *Lisa*. Unlike elementary students who go through an initial stage of asking many non-philosophical questions, most

of these students had good questions from the very beginning. Only one student was superficial and clearly lacked a genuine commitment to the community. He had his own agenda (hemp) and managed to work it into every dialogue. I was unable to engage him in meaningful discussion, and very soon his lack of sincerity was met with general disdain by the rest of the students in the class. In response, rather than take the class more seriously, he began to cut class and finally dropped it altogether.

As we progressed through the novel, problems arose. The students were put off by the way the characters in the book interacted with their parents and their peers. It was not that the novel was poorly written; my students simply felt that it was too contrived and implausible-too unrealistic and disconnected from the world that they experienced. Without a practiced understanding of and commitment to philosophical inquiry, my students lacked the patience to find the philosophical richness of this novel. Their questions often reflected their lack of connection to the novel. They would ask, for instance, "Why does he talk like that? No one talks like that." Facilitating these kinds of questions became very taxing. Eventually, I decided to try some other short stories that I had written and developed a few years before, some logic discussions and exercises, and current events articles. The students enjoyed the stories, some of which had Hawaiian characters, and all of which had more current settings and language.

Many students also enjoyed learning about Aristotelian logic. I found that an occasional "traditional" framework of teaching-with some direct teaching, follow-up discussion and group work on the exercises-worked very well. We discussed assumptions, inferences, implications and what "good thinking" was all about. We did exercises on several aspects of reasoning that previously had been unnamed and somewhat elusive. Some days were good and others were quiet, long, and disappointing.

Many times the students appeared to be uninterested and unenthusiastic about our dialogue. (I would try to keep the faith by remembering my youngest son who would appear to be in another world when I would read to him but who could repeat the story word for word when asked.)

In between our work on reasoning, we would discuss current issues, many of which had ethical dimensions. The students wanted to learn how to think about those issues closest to them, such as dealing with a friend who was doing drugs, whether or not to have sex and/or to use birth control, what the drinking age should be, prejudice problems, abuse and abusive relationships, responsibility to parents vs. school responsibilities, how one should treat one who is different, and so on. I believe that for some of my students, their engagement in these philosophical discussions was the first time in their lives they had engaged in the learning process. This engagement carried over into their work on logic and reasoning. Throughout these discussions it was clear to me that these students wanted to learn how to think, not what to think, and were coming to see "doing philosophy" as a way of improving their thinking.

I recognized that many of the personal and ethical issues my students were grappling with overlapped the concerns of their elders that registered as resistance to formal education. I did not directly encourage my students to critique their elders, but in the course of our ethical inquiries, many of their local cultural values were taken up, as were competing values from the larger culture. Throughout the course my personal contact with the educationally unsupportive families was minimal (part of their resistance was to avoid interaction with me), and took place outside of school. However, it was apparent that my students were using our philosophical inquiries to beginning to confront some of their family problems. I was impressed by their ability to articulate the values of the elders that were in conflict with the western education system, and to apply

rudimentary reasoning skills in their deliberations on this conflict. They realized the seriousness and delicacy of the conflict and approached it with mindful concern. I do not know what decisions the students have made regarding their futures. Perhaps, though, they now have a broader perspective and some tools for thinking about their options and choices, which they did not possess before.

I was continually disappointed, however, at our inability as a community to persist with an idea or issue long enough to work out conclusions that were very sophisticated or meaningful. Only very rarely did recognizable construction of concepts take place. We occasionally cracked an idea enough to peek inside briefly, but the momentum was rarely sustained until the next class period. The immediacy of the life issues we discussed made for lively and relevant discussions, but was also a gravitational force we had great difficulty pulling away from, in order to work with philosophical concepts.

I was obligated to give grades to my students, as are most of us who conduct P4C in secondary schools. The evaluation (by students and by teachers) of student practice of philosophy—whether or not it is tied to grading—is an area of inquiry that, until recently, has not received much attention in P4C circles.² Constructing my grading system for our philosophy class led me to reflect on which aspects of that experience I valued more than others. Of course, I kept in mind that grading is a pedagogy: that how and what we evaluate shows our students what we really value. Sixty percent of the grade for my class was determined by participation. I asked that the students keep journals in class and keep track of things they wondered about or things that were problematic. That was worth twenty percent. They had to do a self-evaluation, and there were some quizzes and essays for the remaining twenty percent of their grade. I believe that, as I intended, the participation portion of the grade motivated some of the

quieter students to speak up more often than they would have. Typically, when these students began to contribute to the dialogue, they saw that their opinion was valued; this led them to trust the sincerity of the group, and eventually they revealed a more relaxed and comfortable manner and were more consistent in their participation. Even "Punahale" occasionally communicated on a deeper level, albeit with giggles and embarrassment.

Results and Reflections

The students took the Cornell Critical Thinking Test on the last day of the semester, in January, 1999. While one student showed a loss, all the others gained. The average gain was 6.6 score points, and five students gained more than ten points. With a mean score of 50.6 they had scored higher than any other high school group, and higher than several college undergraduate groups (who ranged 46.4 - 52.2). The results are shown in Table 1. I must stress that I did not do a formal analysis of the test scores, but I think that improvement is clearly demonstrated. Obviously, this single test can-

not be taken too seriously. However, it did cause me to raise my eyebrows and reconsider the value of the dialogues and discussions and also the students' reflective writing exercises.

What happened with this community of inquiry? How had the students progressed beyond the familial posturing and bickering? Initially, I believe it was the opportunity to talk seriously about troubling issues that attracted these students to the practice of philosophy. A dialogue that stands out was one on the mandatory seatbelt use laws. They were able to bring issues regarding freedom and personal choice to the forefront, and they had well-reasoned positions on several sides. This ability to apply good reasoning skills to their real lives was exhilarating for them.

One thing I noticed over the course of the semester was that the students were increasingly willing to take risks, to allow themselves to be vulnerable. "Kuuipo" would say, "No, really you guys-listen!" And they would. Interestingly, the person mentioned earlier who undermined the dia-

Table 1.
Pre- and posttest critical thinking scores.

Student	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Gain or Loss
A	39	39	0
B	—	51	NA
C	44	55	+15
D	34	39	+5
E	37	50	+13
F	47	51	+4
G	46	36	-10
H	—	55	NA
I	51	61	+10
J	58	62	+4
K	40	61	+21
L	50	55	+5
M	43	50	+7
N	39	44	+5
O	44	—	NA
P	43	—	NA
N=16	Mean: 43.9	Mean: 50.6	Net Gain: +75 Average Gain: +6.6

logue with a lack of sincerity actually seemed to bring the others together. Inadvertently, their frustration with this student led the others in the community to observe what didn't work and in this way they were nudged to a higher level of functionality. They discovered that they valued sincerity.

Even at rudimentary levels of reasoning, if the community decides that it will discuss sincerely, valuing begins to occur. As we honed in on stories and issues relevant to their lives, interest was piqued and students were motivated. When the students began to value the dialogue, they were willing to improve their thinking skills—it was worth something to them. This willingness is crucial with high school students. It was as if they were admitting the value of their education—an enormous step for some. This willingness represented a state of acquiescence, which could never have been obtained forcibly. It was a significant intrinsic move, a Rogerian act of free choice. And the more their reasoning improved, however slowly, the more interesting and meaningful our discussions of difficult teenage problems became, and the more they valued the experience.

As I reflected on these test results, I recalled many informal discussions I had with these students, which took place during breaks, lunch and even in other classes in which I had some of my philosophy students. They were often able to identify underlying assumptions and unreasonable generalizations. They listened to me with understanding when I would ask them to examine an assumption for fallacies. They were constantly calling each other on using “excuses” instead of good reasons. Some even went out of their way (i.e. actually researched) to find examples to support their ideas, and to find counter-examples to blow someone else's ideas apart! And they were able to think “beyond the immediate,” to the implications of some of their choices. The students were capable of a thoughtful discussion of the ethical implications of actions they took while working at their jobs. And

two students actually decided to stop smoking cigarettes, after reasoning about what they were doing and deciding that it just didn't make sense.

I have also recalled that there were times when their appreciation of philosophical inquiry as a way of learning made my students critical of their less-than-optimal school environment. They began to express annoyance with the lower quality of education they felt they were receiving, an indication that they were beginning to relinquish their detachment and apathy. It was no longer only the brightest who showed concern about educational opportunity and who objected to unqualified teachers.

Clearly, by the end of the semester, most of the students had gained some level of metacognitive awareness, and I had some evidence of the transfer of this awareness outside of class. Punahale, for instance, came to me in the spring to let me know that she “uses philosophy” with her boyfriend and asks him to try and walk in her shoes and see what it feels like from her side. She giggled and said that he doesn't like it, but it makes him see her point of view. Only now, as I write this am I beginning to appreciate what actually did occur in that high school class.

Further Reflections: What I Have Learned

One obvious lesson I learned is that the idiom of the texts we use in teaching young people to do philosophy does make a difference. Of course, practice in philosophy increases our ability to find relevance in disparate texts and experiences; but in the initial stages of learning the practice of philosophy—especially in a pedagogy that centers around stories, as is the case with most P4C curriculum-texts that are out-dated and/or culturally distant from the students can be an unnecessary stumbling block. This is perhaps especially true when the beginning students are teen-agers. I learned to use texts and stories that maintain philosophical integrity but connect enough to the students' reality that they could focus on the philosophically relevant issues and not be side-

tracked by the language and behavior of the characters. In the future I plan to use literature as well for this purpose. I believe that more effort needs to be directed to updating and localizing the North American P4C materials in order to promote a functional level of student interest and to prevent distraction from the content because of the delivery.

I have been reminded that the learning that occurs in a philosophy class is not always apparent to the teacher. It was important for me to recall that the students' perceptions of our progress, as a community of inquiry was often different from my own. Many times in evaluating our discussions, the students felt that they had been provoked to think about something in a new way or to question their own ideas, when I had felt that the discussion had been superficial, and had ultimately led nowhere. However, the Cornell Test results indicated that these philosophy students internalized more than was apparent to me in our actual classroom dialogues. After some consideration, therefore, I believe that I need to give more credence to my students' self-evaluations. I believe the results of the thinking test were confirmed by my observations of the students both inside and outside of class.

Reflection has also brought me to a new appreciation of an aspect of our discussions that I did not fully exploit at the time: non-verbal communication. Philosophical dialogue, or rather verbal communication itself is difficult for students who have not practiced it throughout their school years, as was the case with most of my philosophy students. Added to this is the issue of cultural habits of communication. Hawaiians are traditionally people of few words. However, their body language is well developed and subtle: a slight nod of the head or raised eyebrow carries much meaning. Their storytelling is frequently expressed through choreography, as in hula and chant. I believe this cultural habit effected the nature of our classroom dialogues. I had observed daily that the Caucasian students partici-

pated the most outwardly: in speaking and in large gesture. But these forms of communication did not necessarily convey more meaning than the subtler forms preferred by my Hawaiian students. A few simple nods with bowed head may express understanding, deep thought and wonder. In this regard it is interesting to note that two of the most quiet students demonstrated two of the most considerable gains in Cornell post-test scores.

Significantly, however, part of our progress as a community of inquiry was a mutual adaptation from the diverse cultural sides. Through my continual encouragement and the eventual encouragement of their peers, the least demonstrative students began to speak out more often, in the interest of enriching the dialogue. And conversely, the others began to attend to the more subtle facial expressions and body language of their peers. They all began to pay attention to the multiple facets of communication that were taking place in our community. In doing so, they were demonstrating the caring thinking that is so difficult to teach. The lesson I take from this experience is that as the teacher, I need to make this process of mutual adaptation of communication styles more explicit.

More broadly, I have learned again that in our practice of doing philosophy we have a great responsibility to know our students and their cultural contexts. Otherwise our perceptions may deceive us. Journals are an excellent way to get reflective feedback from the students, which may be very enlightening. Our classrooms in the United States are increasingly diverse, and the richness of this diversity has importance that we can only begin to assess. Subtle differences in perception, value and expression that occur in a culturally diverse community create an environment, which stimulates the mind in unseen ways, outside of the examined ideas, yet integral to the meaning making. While diversity creates new difficulties in terms of learning about the new cultures represented in our community, it may indeed enrich our

understanding of language and communication, increasing the range of our means of communication, enabling us to construct meaning more subtle and nuanced, and helping us to appreciate others on a deeper level.

My reflections on this class have also strengthened my conviction that teachers must have the opportunity to form communities of professional inquiry. This is something I tried to initiate in this high school, but without success. In spite of the generally low level of qualification, there were many well-meaning teachers who had wonderful ideas and a desire for excellence. However, each person had his or her own agenda, which precluded "community" efforts. All these great minds and ideas had no common thread, nothing that pulled them together to bring a project or idea to fruition. I proposed that we start a teacher Community of Inquiry where we could discuss philosophical issues related to education, interests we had in common, where our philosophical rifts might be, and so on. While a few expressed interest, no one was able to give up his or her time outside of school and school work to actually get together.

I continue to suspect that the greatest leap in a community of inquiry is the first "Aha!" - that first expansion of awareness into some meaningful problem or idea. If we as facilitators can foster an environment where this first "Aha!" can occur, then we have accomplished much. In today's classrooms, there is much talk about teachers as facilitators and the constructivist model of education, both of which blend with the methodology of Philosophy for Children. Unfortunately, these classrooms are few and far between. As we struggle in the midst of transition and transformation, we must meet the students where they are, as Dewey might

say. I learned that I must begin at the beginning and not assume that students have any of the skills they need to be productive members of a community of philosophical inquiry. I learned that I must be intimately cognizant of the cultural communication habits of the participants and must foster this attentiveness in the other members of the community. I learned that if we as educators give our students authentic opportunities to practice good reasoning, they will rise to the occasion. I am always amazed at the true capabilities of my students.

Footnotes

¹ Taro or kalo was brought to the Hawaiian Islands by the first Polynesian settlers and is a staple in the traditional Hawaiian diet. Its tuber-root is pounded to make thick, pudding-like poi, which is eaten with each meal. The cultivation of the kalo and the pounding of the poi is labor-intensive and requires much practice with the Hawaiian elders. If the young people do not learn these traditional skills, the art and its significance will be lost.

² Several recent studies have made excellent progress in assessing P4C projects. The March 1998 issue (Vol. 6, No. 1) of *Critical and Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy for Children* contains three articles which report the results of empirical studies and methodology for evaluating P4C: Susan Gardner: "Philosophy for Children Really Works!: A Report on a Two Year Empirical Study," Richard Morehouse: "The Use of Student Argument Skills: A Report on a Two Year Empirical Study," and Tock Keng Lim: "How to Evaluate Philosophy for Children."

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