REFLECTIONS OF TEACHERS ON THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

Lim Tock Keng

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REFLECTIONS OF TEACHERS ON
THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

Tock Keng Lim
Nanyang Technological University

Kunawadhyammal Kaliannan
Raffles Girls Secondary School

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the facilitating role of Philosophy for Children (P4C) teachers in the creation of the community of inquiry in their classrooms. It reports on the teachers' conceptions and reflections on their roles and teaching experiences in their P4C classes. The teachers were interviewed and surveyed regularly over the last two years. One teacher, in particular, wrote more extensively on her experiences. Most teachers enjoyed teaching in the programme although they were rather apprehensive at the beginning. Currently, they have established good rapport with their classes. Within the Singapore context, the teachers are concerned with teaching students how to think. They are helping students to explore depths of issues and to discover new directions and strengths. A significant point, particularly important in the multi-racial and multi-religious community of Singapore, is that P4C would encourage students to acknowledge and respect the views of other members in the community.

Introduction

When children are encouraged to think philosophically, the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry. Such a community is committed to the procedures of inquiry, to responsible search techniques that presuppose an openness to evidence and to reason. It is assumed that these procedures of the community, when internalized, become the reflective habits of the individual.

Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan (1980)

The Philosophy for Children (P4C) Programme, initiated in January 1992 in Singapore, is currently on in Henry Park Primary, Bedok South Secondary and Raffles Girls' Secondary. The

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programme adopts a Socratic structure, a process approach where the teacher, as the facilitator of a group of around 20 students (generally half a class of students in Singapore schools), motivates students to think for themselves. It introduces students to philosophical issues through the discussion of passages of narrative novels specially written for each of the grade levels, K to 12. The instructional approach utilized in the P4C programme is identified as "the community of inquiry" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980; Sharp, 1993). The teachers attempt to create a community of inquiry in the classroom to facilitate students to discuss philosophical issues embedded in the novels.

The teacher's role in the P4C programme is difficult; instead of "teaching" the teacher is participating with the students in a community of inquiry where the building of ideas and respect for self and others are important. Communities of inquiry are characterized by persistent inquiry to increase knowledge and understanding, a shared sense of puzzlement which stimulates further inquiry; students gradually become aware that they must accept responsibility for their own views and learn to think for themselves.

This paper examines the facilitating role of the P4C teachers in the creation of the community of inquiry in their classrooms. It focuses on the teachers' reflections on their teaching experiences in the P4C classes. As in Zeichner and Liston's (1987) concept of reflective practitioners, encouraging teachers to reflect on their experiences can only help them to be better facilitators. Schon (1987) believed that teachers learn through continuous action and reflection on what they do.

Taking stock of the P4C programme

Currently Henry Park Primary is doing Pixie (Lipman, 1981), while Bedok South Secondary and Raffles Girls Secondary are doing Harry (Lipman, 1982). The teachers find the accompanying manuals useful (Lipman & Sharp, 1982; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1984). At the end of 1994, 12 teachers from the 3 schools responded to the questionnaire "Taking stock of the 1994 programme" (attached as Appendix A) which surveyed conceptions and reflections on their roles and teaching experiences in their P4C classes. All the teachers reported that they enjoyed the involvement in the programme. While some commented on the great interaction among the students, others found the students inquisitive and enthusiastic; a couple who were groping in the dark initially became more confident. On what attracted her to the programme, one teacher said:

It was a new venture in the school curriculum which prompted me to give it a go. Secondly, my background in Philosophy, though it was a minor subject in my degree course in the university, gave me the courage to take on this challenge.
A sampling of teachers' perceptions in Table 1 revealed that teachers perceived that students were fairly uncertain at the beginning of the year; some students were even bewildered. Students in Singapore, particularly high achievers, are fairly cautious when they encounter new procedures in the classroom; they would rather listen than contribute. They have a "correct answer" syndrome; they would not participate in class unless they are confident their responses are in line with what the teacher wants. The teachers realised that the students were not used to questioning and thinking through an argument (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

At the end of the year, teachers found that most of the students had improved. Students became more open, confident and comfortable with the procedures. Some were very interested, excited and active participants. One teacher reflected in greater detail her experiences:

I was quite apprehensive when I entered the field in the beginning, not really knowing what the outcome would be like - whether the discussions were going to be fruitful or not - whether it would make any impact on my students! My worry as to whether the students saw any intrinsic value in the discussions was unfounded when I looked at the feedback given to me by my students at the end of the year. Perhaps, the fact that I had taught many of them at Secondary One could have made them feel at ease with me even at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, even the very quiet ones were able to contribute quite effectively in the discussions. I had established a good rapport with this batch of students so much so that they were able to discuss with me their personal stuff.

Building a community of inquiry

Classes in Singapore tend to follow a pattern of the teacher asking a question and then selecting a child out of several children (who may have their hands raised) to answer a question. What generally followed would be a series of disconnected answers, with teachers repeating the students' answers. The typical response-answer pattern would be teacher-pupil-teacher-pupil. The initial experiences of the class are reported in Lim (1994a; 1994b). Students are used to listening to the teacher attentively and "learning everything" the teacher said. In the community of inquiry, though, students would have to listen to one another in class, formulate their thoughts, ideas and theories and ask questions. Students have to be aware of contradictions, either within the statements of one participant or between statements from two different speakers. They learn how to disagree,
how not to feel put down or insulted, and how to alter their ideas when confronted with evidence and good arguments. All these require judgement on the part of the students.

The teachers were surveyed on whether the students could probe for assumptions and detect contradictions in the P4C session. As presented in Table 2, some students were able to probe for assumptions while others find some difficulty. The teachers also found some particularly astute and sharp students. Similarly, with detecting contradictions, some students appear to be better than others. In terms of what else students could do, teachers reported that students could give their own views, raise issues to support their stand as well as offer alternatives and elaborations (see Table 2). Furthermore students could make use of their own experiences to draw parallels with events in their lives. Teachers helped students to spot fallacies in views and opinions encountered in their daily lives.

Self correction is important in the development of a community of inquiry. Generally, teachers find that most students were quite willing to revise their positions in the light of the dialogue, though not all the time. While some teachers did not find evidence of group solidarity (particularly groups with limited P4C sessions owing to curriculum constraints in the school), others did. Some teachers attributed other factors, besides P4C, contributing to group solidarity: the 'gel' effect of the classmates as they get to know each other as the year progressed.

The teachers felt that the philosophical discussion allowed for the development of different sub-themes within a broad theme. It enabled students to do a thorough search of the field, often elaborating on issues. Students actively engaged themselves in clarifying issues and indulging in higher-order thinking skills, very often investigating assumptions and implications. The teachers found spirited agreement or disagreement in the community of inquiry. This is evident on a sub-group basis; there is a care and share attitude among the sub-group members where students may support the ideas of members.

The community of inquiry provided a safe environment for critical, creative and caring thinking for the students. In the light of unhealthy and heated arguments taking place or one party dominating or the whole group heading towards a predetermined conclusion, the teacher could guide and assist in putting things as far as possible in the balanced perspective. One teacher, in particular felt that students in a community of inquiry can be self-generating:
Self-generating could be seen as a desire on the part of the students to carry out a philosophical discussion independently, where they were able to discuss among themselves. I tried it out once when I was unable to carry out the discussion because of my commitment to another extra-curricular activity group. I set the students to carry out the session themselves. However, I was in the same room as them and able to observe and keep an eye on them. I had already appointed a student to be the facilitator for the group. The discussion went on fine - the arguments were getting heated up and the noise level went up. I had to warn them about the noise level. Students appeared to be able to guide themselves along a focused issue. Detailed facts were discussed. After some time, though, the discussion heated up to such a level that the facilitator could no longer direct the discussion. This led to chaos and unruliness among the students and I had to step right in to put everything in place.

Asian philosophy and other topics

The P4C programme in Singapore would be introducing Asian philosophy to let the students be aware of traditional Asian values and way of life. This is particularly important as students are currently exposed to a wide variety of books, magazines, films, television programmes and other influences from the West. The students can comprehend these materials well as they use English as the medium of instruction in all their subjects, except in the study of the mother tongue and languages. The teachers agreed that the introduction of Asian philosophy would reinforce Asian values (see the views in Table 3). They felt the Asian philosophers and their thought could be applied in today’s context. They suggested that simplified readers with Asian stories could be used. In terms of topics in Asian philosophy, teachers suggested introductory ideas in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism and concepts such as filial piety, respect, loyalty, karma, active and passive action, life and death.

To find out additional topics that would interest the students in P4C, one of the teachers conducted a needs assessment where the students indicated what they would like to discuss. The students proposed topics such as abortion, family relationships, life and death, sex education, euthanasia, capital punishment, racial discrimination, violence, empathy and Chinese and Indian Philosophies. The teacher commented:

There was an interest among students on these topics; sometimes they could get carried away
with the discussion being oblivious to my existence in class. Of course, I interrupt quite a lot to generate further discussion or to give an opportunity for students to view things from different perspectives. More often than not, these students were able to cite examples drawn from their personal experiences. They were also not shy or intimidated to talk about certain sensitive topics. Some of the viewpoints presented were very bold and showed the maturity level of the students. Students began to take sides and defend their stand and later changed their minds when their ideas were torn apart.

The teacher asked for feedback from the students and was pleased to note that many students find the discussions on the topics to be verbally challenging and interesting, though demanding at times. These sessions had generated such a lot of excitement that the students looked forward to P4C lessons every week. Students also felt deprived of discussion in their other subject areas. There was a great deal of curiosity aroused in the discussions; students enjoyed the unpredictability of what issue might surface in the discussions or what was going to be said next.

Some students felt that P4C made them think before talking and help them to be unbiased. They understand the need to have an open mind and accept views different from their own. Others had learnt in the course of discussions to listen to both sides of the story before making judgements or concluding about certain issues. Still others felt that P4C enabled them to have an inquisitive mind; they were able to probe further into other possible views on controversial issues. The contradicting ideas and views made them weigh the pros and cons and look at things from different angles.

**Conclusion**

In the community of inquiry, both teachers and students may have to modify some of their own views through listening to each other. As commented by one of the teachers:

No one is perfect! There had been a few times when I overlooked a few pointers. More heads are always better than one. The students were able to point out a few pointers empathising with certain people. That, I thought was a smart move by the kids. It showed that the students were really thinking.

Teachers also felt it useful to give students the criteria of good reasoning and critical thinking:

I think it is useful to give students the criteria of good reasoning, critical thinking, because
in the wide spectrum of knowledge and arguments presented, students must not be left in the dark to generalise or make sweeping statements and get away with them. Rather they ought to develop these skills so that they could use their discretion and autonomy to work independently and decide for themselves whether they were using good reasoning skills. It will give them a focus - setting some goals in life - and make them more systematic and logical in their daily lives.

Teachers in the P4C programme in Singapore are concerned about guiding students on how to think. As students explored the depths of issues, they would discover new directions, strengths and conceptualise, forming a range of values which would set their moods to task. The curiosity and wonderment in their arguments would enable the students to work out philosophical problems and puzzles in a more cohesive and structured way. Furthermore, the programme encouraged the student to acknowledge and respect the views of the other members in the community and therefore learn how to correct unwarranted impressions formed. This is particularly important in the multi-racial and multi-religious community of Singapore.
REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At the Beginning of the Year</th>
<th>Towards the End of the Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They were not used to questioning, thinking through an argument, taking unknown variables into consideration. In addition, they were not forthcoming with their opinions and views.</td>
<td>Generally more open, comfortable with the procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bewildered - probably not accustomed to being able to speak and have an audience.</td>
<td>Very much more focused and on task. Excited and exciting responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather uncertain about the aim of the study of philosophy and how they could apply it to their lives/studies.</td>
<td>Felt more confident and responded better to topics dealt with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool response.</td>
<td>Better, but still not totally successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They were quite apprehensive, not so interactive for the first and second lessons because some of them were not used to the teacher.</td>
<td>They were active participants by the end, so much so, they conducted one lesson by themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They were curious and were unsure of what was required. They were quite restrained at first, not knowing that they could speak freely at all times</td>
<td>They were interested and gave good ideas and reasoning over certain issues mentioned. They were more on task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe for assumptions:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once in a while.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>They are more aware of the need to probe for assumptions but still need guidance.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Only a few astute ones; others are prompted by their example to think logically.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quite quick/sharp as it is now, especially for outspoken ones.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Detect contradictions:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite often.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite readily / quickly most of the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More able to this especially if it concerns their daily life. More academic content requires guidance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the time.</td>
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<th>Others:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Offer alternatives readily, elaborate on statements, give own views which may contradict views given in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views and opinions (gathered by the students through interviews of parents, family members, etc.) were discussed in class for their validity and soundness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw parallels with events in their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage others to voice their opinions, often use specific examples to illustrate their points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise issues to support their views and stands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play spot-the-fallacy game constantly.</td>
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Extension to include Asian philosophy:

Use certain simplified readers on these teachings - see how these can still apply today even though they were written many years ago.

Introduce the philosophical thought of some Asian philosophers which relate to ethics and the community. Deal with their perception of man and human nature.

Have a module where the students present on their grandparents’ views.

Include Asian values and principles in the sessions. Reinforce Asian values.

Introduce Asian philosophers and their thought and apply it to today’s context.

Modules containing episodes reflecting Asian values and philosophy.

Topics in Asian philosophy:

Introductory ideas on Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism

Respect others’ views, consider all factors without getting too extreme.

Concept of filial piety, respect and loyalty.

Concept of karma, active and passive action, life and death.
TAKING STOCK OF THE 1994 PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN (P4C) PROGRAMME

Did you enjoy teaching P4C this year? ________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

How have your students reacted to the P4C programme this year?

At the beginning of the year: _________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Towards the end of the year: _________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Currently, to what extent do your students:

probe for assumptions _____________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

detect contradictions _______________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

What else do the students do? _________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Are students more willing to revise their positions in the light of the dialogue?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Is group solidarity beginning to form? _________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

___________________________

Do you think there is any spillover from P4C to the other subjects that you are teaching?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________
What about the students? Do you think there is any spillover from P4C to the other subjects that they are studying?

Please ask some of your colleagues for their views concerning the above question.

What kind of training would you like next year?

Could you give me some views on how we can extend the programme to include Asian philosophy?

What topics in Asian philosophy can we do?

How else can we extend the programme?

If you have extended the programme, please share with the rest of us what you did?

Source: Tock Keng Lim, Nanyang Technological University.