

## Co-curricular activity

### **Philosophy in the Classroom: Oxenford State School**

A practical look at how to conduct philosophy with a class to demonstrate values education.

#### **Year levels**

Early Years – Middle childhood (5-11 years)

#### **Explicit values focus**

Philosophy aims to build on the students' own wonder and curiosity about ideas that are important to them. The subject matter of Philosophy is the common, central and contestable concepts that underpin both our experience of human life and all academic disciplines. Philosophy is a vehicle for holding purposeful discussions to help students understand and be able to apply the nine *Values for Australian Schooling*. Examples of such concepts relate directly to the nine Values:

- Care and compassion
- Doing your best
- Fair go
- Freedom
- Honesty and trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, tolerance and inclusion

#### **Key learning areas**

- English
- Society and Environment
- Health and Physical Education

#### **School profile**

Oxenford State School is a state primary school situated on the Northern Gold Coast with approximately 540 students from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has been a part of the community for 19 years and pressures of transport, childcare and work are impacting significantly on parental involvement in school activities. A growing percentage of our student population have been referred to our Special Needs committee as needing support. Concerns noted include speech/language-processing problems, learning difficulties (literacy/numeracy), and social, emotional, medical and behavioural issues.

Glasser's Choice Theory is the basis of how we understand behaviour and form relationships within the school. As a result of the diversity in our student population, there is a deliberate and clear focus on ensuring that school is a needs' satisfying place for everyone. Teachers employ a variety of teaching practices and styles suited to student needs. These are also adjusted to the learning environment. Productive pedagogy that promotes intellectual quality, global and local connectedness, supportive social environments and recognition of difference are engaged to focus instruction and improve student learning

outcomes. Teaching/learning environments available include single-year level, composite, multi-age classes and cooperative teaching arrangements.

## **Reason for co-curricular activity**

Through our participation in Values Education Good Practice Schools Stage 1 (VEGPS1), the Oxenford cluster wanted to further the implementation of Philosophy in the Classroom as the vehicle for framing discussions and bringing to the fore the values that underpin everyday issues. The central pedagogical tool and guiding ideal of Philosophy is the Community of Inquiry. In a Community of Inquiry students work together to generate and answer their own questions about the philosophical issues contained in purpose-written materials or a wide range of other resources. Thinking is critical, creative, collaborative and caring. In this environment, values like respect, tolerance, doing your best and others are constantly shaping classroom activity. Values as 'behaviours' are demonstrated by engaging the protocols inherent in conducting a Community of Inquiry process.

## **Implementation and development**

Philosophy lessons involve creating an environment and opportunity for students to inquire together through class discussion and small-group activity about life's 'big' questions. Teachers choose appropriate resource material to stimulate curiosity and start children thinking more deeply about issues and ideas. Stimulus materials (stories, film clips, music, art) may draw on philosophical themes such as right and wrong, friendship, bullying, fairness, rights and responsibilities. Philosophy sessions encourage students to think for themselves, accept responsibility for their own views and also to learn respect by valuing the ideas of others. The general structure of implementing Philosophy within the Classroom can be described in four phases:

### **Phase 1: Establishing the environment and protocols for effective communication**

During a Community of Inquiry all participants share their own ideas so each individual must consider many different perspectives. This encourages tolerance and cooperation. It is therefore imperative that even before creating the agenda guidelines for group discussion are negotiated so that opinions are respected, assumptions and preconceived ideas can be challenged in a socially appropriate manner and discussion is the pathway – not the leader. The learning environment should support students in:

- discussing views which may be contrary to their own
- giving and receiving relevant suggestions and feedback, and
- promoting appreciation, courtesy, concern, respect, responsibility and understanding.

Students need to establish guidelines for group discussion that will enable them to work effectively together. This process will itself require students to discuss, negotiate and reach a consensus. It may form part of an initial exploration of rights and responsibilities, respect and appreciation of difference, and may be linked with the review and evaluation of the school's overall code of behaviour. The following is an example of some guidelines.

- We listen to each other – this means one person speaks at a time and gives everyone a 'fair go'.

- We think about and build on each other's ideas – showing 'respectful' listening behaviour.
- We make sure everyone has a chance to speak – again, giving everyone a 'fair' go to have their say.
- We respect everyone's ideas – this means we don't use 'put downs' or make fun of what others say or do – showing 'tolerance' for each other's opinions.
- We are helpful and constructive when challenging another's viewpoint – showing 'care' and 'compassion' for each other's feelings.
- We offer help and support when it is needed.
- We have a right to 'pass' if we do not want to speak on an issue.
- We show appreciation when someone explains or does something well, or is helpful in some way to us.
- We are prepared for a discussion – this means we need to ask questions and build on others' ideas.
- We need to give reasons to support our opinion.
- We will check assumptions, reasoning, evidence – our own as well as others'.
- We will define and discuss points of difference as well as points of agreement.
- We will ask others for reasons, definitions, evidence, examples and assumptions if necessary.
- We will acknowledge it is alright to change your mind on previously held ideas.
- We understand there may be no single right answer.

## Phase 2: Creating the agenda

In a community of inquiry students share their experiences by thinking and talking about ideas that interest them. The organisational arrangement for philosophical inquiry is the class discussion, which is student-centred rather than teacher-directed. Under the guidelines or rules for a Community of Inquiry the teacher facilitates discussion and models the procedures. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator or co-inquirer who is responsible for the *form* of discussion rather than the specific subject matter. Students should be taught *how* to think – not *what* to think. In creating the agenda a typical lesson involves the group reading of a source text, followed by the gathering of students' questions that have been stimulated by the reading. These questions form the agenda for further philosophical discussion. Each reading usually generates enough questions for several subsequent discussions in the Community of Inquiry as indicated in the process below.

1. Seat students in a way that maximises the opportunity for communication and democratic behaviour. (usually a circle)
2. Revisit 'protocols' to guide the group discussion. (Refer to Phase 1)
3. Remind students of the 'language' to accompany protocols. *I agree with ...because.... I disagree with ... because ...*
4. Read/show the 'stimulus material', such as a story, an article on a current event, a video clip, a music clip, a webpage. **The 'stimulus' must be chosen carefully so as to provoke a philosophical debate.**
5. Ask children what they found interesting or puzzling. An example of a question could be Can you think of a question that is not about the story itself but about an issue in the story that lots of people might wonder about?
6. Gather children's questions on the board, with their names below the relevant

question.

7. Group questions that are the same or similar. For example:

- ◆ How do we know about right and wrong?
  - ▶ Where does a person's conscience come from?
  - What is fair?
  - Is fighting always wrong?
  - Why is it that saving face is important to some?
  - Why don't we understand how others feel?
  - ▶ Should we give everyone a fair go?
  - Does it matter what people think?
  - Should what other people think stop us from doing what we believe to be right?
- ◆ Right and Wrong □ Respect ▶ Fairness ● Integrity

Decide on the connecting question or theme to be discussed. The order could be decided by the students voting for the most interesting question or theme they wish to pursue.

### Phase 3: The 'Community of Inquiry' discussion

The building of a Community of Inquiry is crucial in implementing Philosophy in the Classroom. The class becomes a community of people who inquire cooperatively and collaboratively in a self-reflective and critical manner about issues of concern to all. The Community of Inquiry process is characterised by:

- Inquiry aimed at knowledge and understanding
- Intellectual risk taking and self correction
- Cooperation, trust, tolerance and respect
- A shared sense of puzzlement and wonder
- Student-centred dialogue
- Participants accepting responsibility for their own views
- Students learning to think for themselves (as opposed to thinking by themselves)

The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, supporting students as they learn to assess evidence, negotiate, make decisions, solve problems, work independently and in groups, and learn from each other. It is not enough for students to know about philosophical issues; they need to engage with them. Teachers need to focus on procedural and substantive questioning. The following is an example of the process in conducting a 'Community of Inquiry' discussion (which follows on from points 1 to 8 in Phase 2 above):

- Encourage participants to direct their comment/discussion to the whole circle or directly to the person they are answering, rather than through the teacher.
- Have students raise hands or use 'talking cards' to facilitate 'taking turns.'
- Participate in the discussion but, as the teacher, also 'hold back' sometimes so as not to influence too much.
- Facilitate questioning that signals cognitive moves that might encourage metacognition.
- Encourage recognition in the community that many questions are complex and may never be answered.
- Have children take responsibility for their comments and be prepared to defend, modify or change them as appropriate.

The students' collaborative inquiry can be further extended by the use of appropriate discussion plans and exercises which function to maintain focus and encourage depth of discussion. Purpose-written texts are just one possible source material. Other written material, images and recordings can also be used to stimulate philosophical inquiry.

#### **Phase 4: Closure**

At the conclusion of a session it is important to engage students in a process of self-reflection in order for them to evaluate their understanding of the concept/value discussed.

Before concluding the session invite the students to reflect on their thinking and the discussion by asking:

- Did we ask some really interesting questions today?
- Did we give good reasons for what we said?
- What parts of the discussion were best?
- Did we really dig deep? Did we deepen our understanding of issues?
- Did we establish something or understand it better as a result of the discussion?
- What things were raised that we would like to think about further?

Students should also regularly reflect on their effective participation in terms of the protocols and behaviours demonstrated during the Community of Inquiry process.

- Did we listen well?
- Did everyone get a chance to contribute?
- Did we help each other?
- Did we come up with good ideas?
- Did we look at different points of view? Did we show tolerance for others' opinions?
- Did we manage to explore our disagreements in a socially appropriate way that respected others points of view?
- Did we listen to each other and cooperate well?

#### **Outcomes**

The process of philosophical exploration in this environment encourages students to:

- take increased responsibility for their own learning processes
- develop as independent and self-correcting learners
- develop the confidence and skills to articulate their own views in a group
- develop higher-order thinking skills in the context of meaningful discussion.

Philosophy achieves these aims by giving students the opportunity to think for themselves about ideas and concepts that they themselves select as the ones which are interesting and worthwhile pursuing.