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Training Philosophy for Children Facilitators Via Technology and Peer Assessment

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Abstract

Research shows online learning is more effective than traditional face-to-face learning, especially when learners are highly motivated, and this can be coupled with peer assessment, which studies have also shown to be effective. Training can commence with simple information-giving, in an outline of the objectives and procedures of Philosophy for Children (P4C). You will be matched up with one (or more) Peer Buddy(ies), with whom you will reciprocally discuss your onward plans. This should be followed by demonstration videos of P4C in action, with participants of different ages. These can be discussed online (synchronously or asynchronously) in pairs or small groups (perhaps from different countries, subject to language constraints). Information-giving on the principles of organising your own P4C project should then be given, together with a planning rubric. Implementation of your first P4C project will follow. Video-record a session and mutually discuss the videos with your buddy. Highlight three good points and three less good points from each, identifying sections of video that illustrate these issues. Then report back to a wider session to see to what extent your good and bad points were shared with others. All we need is a university to develop a MOOC on this topic.

Keywords: online, video, peer discussion, peer assessment

Training Philosophy for Children Facilitators Via Technology and Peer Assessment

Keith J Topping

~~“When I look back on all the crap I learned in high school,~~

~~it’s a wonder I can think at all”~~

~~(Paul Simon, Kodachrome, 1973)~~

~~Well, that seems rather harsh. But it is certainly true that~~ especially in high school, there is an emphasis on content knowledge. The basic transferable skills such as reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling and so forth are assumed to have been taught in primary school, and high school is thought to be the place where those skills are deployed to amass knowledge of higher mathematics, literature, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, and so forth.

Yet, how much of that knowledge will ever be used in life after school? As jobs diversify, and new kinds of employment are invented, will that knowledge still be relevant to the new job, even if was in the first place? And will that knowledge actually stay the same anyway, or be changed over time by new discoveries and developments, given the accelerating pace of change in society?

In high schools the problem is worsened by the division of the curriculum into subjects, each subject driven by a subject specialist, who has more training in the subject than in pedagogy. The connections between subjects are often lost, and cross-curricular work is the rarity rather than the norm. Subjects such as Social Studies might aim to produce thoughtful citizens, but form a small part of the high school diet. For the future, jobs that

require memorization of information or doing things by rules or measurement can be mostly done by machines. So, the issue is not do students *have* the content knowledge, but can they *apply* currently relevant content knowledge, which may need to come on a “just in time” basis. Any job that they get, initially they are not going to know how to do.

You will say that the purpose of education is not just to secure gainful employment, contribute to the economy and be part of an effective work force, important as that is, but also to develop the intellect, enable lifelong learning and bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being - morally, creatively, and productively. As Martin Luther King (1948) put it: ‘The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But the most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason but no morals.’

Let us not criticize high schools unjustly. Of course, they deal with elements which are important in a wider sense. Thus, for example, in science and maths, the goal of having students interpret data and make conclusions from it often features in curriculum guidance. The problem is that schools often understand this in very narrow terms, and present students with a highly simplified version of reality, free of conflicting and distracting evidence such as would feature in “real life”. Equally, in English, of course there is investigation of set texts, which require students to come to a conclusion and quote evidence for this conclusion from the text. But again, this is a very narrow.

The issue is, will students have learned how to learn, given that learning might be required constantly, be increasingly driven by electronic devices and depend ever more on intrinsic motivation, metacognitive insight and the ability to self-regulate? Will they have learned the social skills needed to cooperate and develop solutions to problems together (as is much desired by employers), or will the individualistic ethos fostered by national

examinations be perpetuated? How can the self-confidence (or self-esteem) of students be maintained once they move out of the comfort zone of the subjects they have leaned at school? Will they keep or develop the belief that whatever the problem, they have the thinking skills to solve it?

Ah, you might say, but in my university, we have problem-based learning, which requires students to collaborate to solve a problem for which they don't necessarily already have all the required skills. But how much problem-based learning – is it the whole curriculum or just a parallel strand in a curriculum dominated by content knowledge acquisition? And how much problem-based learning occurs in high school?

So, can critical thinking be taught? Can innovation be taught? Yes, but not by direct teacher instruction, but by creating environments where they can flourish, where it's encouraged to think critically, where it's permitted to think outside the box and to be creative. These environments need to foster collaboration and communication to enable people to have new thoughts that have never been thought before - to think innovatively and be innovative.

However, when this is done outside the work space, problems arise. Particularly these days, falsehoods and misinformation inundate all kinds of media and public trust in traditional sources of "news" has declined (Prado, 2018). Public disagreements about established empirical findings are everywhere, and opinion often seems to take precedence over evidence (Buckingham, 2019). Despite some news organisations carefully establishing "fact checking" services with which to interrogate many political speeches, the social media have risen in prominence, not just as a supplement to traditional news media, but in some cases and for some people a substitute. And we have seen that some countries maliciously exploit this to pump fake news into the systems of other countries. Of course, these things are not new, since we know people are more likely to believe information that fits with their

existing preconceptions (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Metz et al., 2018). But the “post-truth” environment certainly presents challenges.

Philosophy for Children

Which brings us to Philosophy for Children (P4C). Philosophy for Children does not appear in the governmentally prescribed curriculum for schools in most countries (with exceptions, e.g., Ireland). However, one has to ask if this would be a good thing anyway. On the one hand it ensures that the idea gets some prominence. On the other it means it becomes a “subject”, deadened with the underlying expectation that there is subject knowledge and right answers which teachers know best. Further, it means only teachers can teach it, when we know that many other kinds of facilitators are very capable at delivering the P4C process.

Of course, P4C is just one of many ways of facilitating critical and creative thinking, but it is perhaps unusual in that its structure is entirely concerned with process. There are no facts to learn, only processes of communication and collaboration, metacognition, maintenance and generalization. The structure of one way of doing P4C has been laid out at length by Topping et al. (2019), and summarised in a booklet produced for UNESCO, which has been sent to the education ministries in all UNESCO countries and translated into Chinese, Spanish, Catalan, French, Russian, Portuguese, Hungarian, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu & Japanese (Topping et al., 2020).

The problem is that it is difficult to learn how to do P4C just from a book. Even with the best of concentration, reading a book and reflecting on it is an isolated and unreal way of learning. A course is needed to help teachers and others learn how to do P4C effectively. Course participants could be pre-service or in-service teachers, but P4C facilitators often come from other backgrounds than teaching, so we would not wish to exclude anyone. The other problem is that people wanting to learn how to do P4C come from all over the world

and have very busy lives, so gathering them all together face-to-face would be extremely costly and highly inconvenient to the participants.

We know from the literature on peer assessment with teachers that although they are perfectly capable of doing peer assessment in relation to their own learning, this does not necessarily extend to how they do or not do it with their own class of children. We need to make this link essential by having teachers peer assess their own peer assessment projects in their own classes. We have also learned from the covid-19 situation that if learning can be put online, it should be. This enables learning to progress when the learners are not able to meet face-to-face, or not able to meet at the same time, which in any case will be true in many countries where the Philosophy for Children aficionados are widely separated by geography.

Consequently, an online course will be described here, accessible by computer or tablet or even mobile phone in any location at any time (since it will be asynchronous rather than synchronous, i.e., everyone doesn't need to be online at the same time). This course will not be replete with direct instruction, but will include problems and practical tasks that participants can solve collaboratively with their students, discuss with their course colleagues and then submit their solutions to peer assessment, to get elaborated feedback. The final peer assessments will form the basis of assessment, which of course would still be necessary before participants could become certified practitioners.

So how can effective training for pre-service and in-service teachers and other facilitators be organised, using carefully designed computer-mediated video modelling, video capture of the participant's own practice, and iterative peer discussion, feedback and assessment? This chapter explores some of the conceptual issues arising from the questions and proposes a framework for delivering training in Philosophy for Children in many countries, of varying degrees of economic development. Current studies have shown online

(and blended) learning to be as effective or more effective than traditional face-to-face learning (Topping et al., 2021). This is especially true when the learners are highly motivated and have time to engage with the program, and are not prone to procrastination.

It has to be said that this course does not yet exist – in other words, this chapter describes a theoretical course structure. Of course, operating the course in the English language would be tricky enough, but many other countries would doubtless like to run courses in their own home languages, which in less developed countries would also run into issues of availability of devices and the internet. Consequently, an attempt has been made to describe the processes and organisation in a way which could be relatively easily replicated in other countries.

Structure of The Course

A brief summary will lead us into further detail. Training can commence with simple information-giving, in the forms of indications of an outline of the objectives and procedures of P4C (which could be based on the UNESCO booklet by Topping, et al., 2020). Then come first thoughts about choosing your own P4C buddy (perhaps with some help from the course organisers) (and perhaps from different countries, subject to language constraints), with whom you will learn to reciprocally discuss your onward plans. This should be followed by demonstration videos of the phases of Philosophy for Children in action, with participants of different ages. These could be then discussed online (synchronously or asynchronously) in pairs or small groups of participants. Information-giving on the principles of organising your own P4C project should then be given, together with a planning rubric. Implementation of your first P4C project will follow. You should video-record a session (although perhaps not the first!) and mutually and reciprocally discuss your videos with your P4C buddy. Highlight around three good points and three less good points from each, and try to identify sections of

video that illustrate these issues. Then you can both report back to a wider (possibly synchronous) virtual session and see to what extent your good and bad points were shared with others. Over time you can keep in touch with your buddy and exchange further videos for discussion, in order to ensure your procedure keeps sharp and up-to-date, and extends to new and perhaps more challenging groups of participants.

Structure of Philosophy for Children

P4C has several sequential steps, which lend themselves to acquisition and practice over time. These can be summarised in 11 steps, but some of these steps can be combined into one course session. Here we will number the steps but prefix them with a letter which indicates which course session they belong to.

1. B Arranging the seating, preferably in a horseshoe shape.
2. B Setting the ground rules regarding respect for everyone and their views – involve the children in this. Examples: Listen to the speaker. Don't "put down" other participants. Respect the views of others even if they seem ill-formed – how can you help improve them? Be open-minded. Be truthful.
3. B You might want to start with the "Awareness Exercise", to calm the children and help them to focus. Have the children sit quietly and focus on different parts of their body, then on different aspects of the room, then on sensory stimuli that can hardly be heard....
4. B Present the "Stimulus" – a story, picture, poem or brief video which introduces a somewhat ambiguous theme from which philosophical questions can be derived and which poses moral dilemmas or raises questions. These might include: Friendship, Helping, Cooperation, Fairness, Patience, Sharing, Forgiveness, Freedom, Anger, Beauty, Fear, Bullying, Happiness, Hope or Lies. You can increasingly introduce

themes with social and emotional implications. As time goes on, encourage children to suggest themes and stimuli.

5. D Facilitators then model good Questioning by asking for clarification, reasons and evidence (inviting children to first think and then answer). Prompt children to keep to the point. Children's questions should improve in quality over time. Give examples of good questions and characterise the nature of good questions.
6. D Promote philosophical dialogue, ensuring all students participate. Encourage open and inviting questions. Encourage respectful listening. Give students thinking time. Withhold judgement – just ask a secondary question. Seek clarification. Encourage giving evidence and examples. Encourage making comparisons. Encourage summarization and evaluation.
7. D Then extend philosophical dialogue into the peer group. Put the children in pairs (or three if there is an odd number in the class) and ask them to discuss their thinking so far. Some students will be much more confident in dyadic peer discussion that they are in whole-class discussion. The facilitator can circulate to offer encouragement and help shape good questions.
8. E Then gather the children back together as a whole group for a plenary session – an attempt to achieve resolution of conflicting opinions. Allow time for children to reorganise their thoughts. Explore alternatives to impulsivity and distractibility. Query the justification for long-held beliefs. Don't be afraid of perplexing or controversial questions. As things progress, a "Community of Enquiry" should develop, with all students understanding the process and offering contributions.
9. E "Thought for the Week" is intended to encourage the students to remember the session and look for occasions when it might be relevant in everyday life over the next week. The aim is to build self-confidence and help children learn to disagree without

falling out. Children should become more self-aware, better at self-regulation (controlling themselves), more empathic (able to understand the life experiences of someone completely different), and better at social skills. Children can report back on their experiences of TftW at the beginning of the next P4C session. The intention is to extend their Generalisation of P4C experiences.

10. F As P4C progresses, the facilitator can focus more on metacognition, asking “How Did We Do That?” Going beyond simple evaluation of a session, the facilitator can ask how the children responded to challenging tasks – with resilience or avoidance? The facilitator can also ask whether children are becoming more metacognitive in lessons other than P4C – across the curriculum.
11. F Once a Community of Enquiry has developed and children are used to the format, the facilitator can extend the Stimuli and Themes to hotter and hotter topics, addressing some of the issues that emerge from “fake news”. The effects of this go beyond the school years and (one hopes) into later adult life. Encourage the children to suggest “hot topics” that really need debating (like “should mobile phones be allowed in classrooms”). Explore how many children have changed their minds about something as a result of P4C – making it clear that it is “O.K.” to change your mind – assuming your new belief is better founded than your old belief. Point out that everyone tends to believe things which conform to existing beliefs, and see if the children can think of examples of this from their own experience.

Thus, you will see that for the purposes of our course, there will be four blocks of learning experience (B, D, E, F). However, as we shall see in the next section, a further three blocks need to be added (A, C and G), to do with information-giving and final assessment.

Detail of the Course

In block A, broad information is given about what P4C is. This can be taken from chapter 2 in Topping et al. (2019). This can be via recorded video lecture, podcast, in writing, or some combination of these. The information is broad and will lead to questions from participants, raised in the chat section. These are dealt with synchronously or asynchronously, with the conversation left online for other course members to review it, add further questions and give answers later). Then the idea of peer buddies is introduced. Peer buddies should probably be matched in relation to the age of their pupils, in the four categories above. Peer buddies discuss online reciprocally (synchronously or asynchronously). Should the buddies be from different countries (subject to language constraints, to show cultural differences) or from the same country (to maximise shared cultural context). Should each participant only have one buddy (where the match may not be perfect) or have two buddies (so there is more chance of a good match with one or the other, but much more time is involved?)

In Block B, brief demonstration videos (2-5 minutes) are given of each of the first four aspects of P4C (Seating, Rules, Awareness, Stimulus), showing how to do it. For each activity there are four age ranges of video available: Early Years/Kindergarten, Early Primary, Later Primary/Lower Middle School; High School/Upper Middle School. The participants should then try out the first four steps with their class or whatever pupils they have access to. After this, they need to discuss their experiences reciprocally with their buddy, commenting on both good and less good aspects of each other's experiences. Then each participant needs to try the first four steps again but videoing themselves and the class. The video does not need to be of good quality, and video taken on mobile phones is acceptable (but take care the sound levels are high enough) and can easily be shared. There can then be a discussion with the buddy based on reciprocal comments on each other's video, on both good points and points needing improvement. Should there be a rubric to scaffold

this discussion? It is thought that the information already given would provide an implicit rubric, but one could be given if found necessary.

Block C is the second (and last) information-giving block, and can use the same methods as Block A, describing all the planning choices and options in designing a P4C project for the pupils in question. This can be based on chapter 3 in Topping et al. (2019). It is accompanied with an extensive planning rubric, which the participant can complete by writing in their answers to each option (see the planning rubric in the free Resources section on the Routledge website www.routledge.com/9781138393264). Once the participant has completed their plan, they share and discuss it reciprocally with their buddy.

Block D covers the next three steps of P4C – Questioning, Dialogue and interaction with Peers. Again, brief demonstration videos of all three steps are available, in four levels according to the age of the pupils. Participants should view these, try out the next three steps, and then discuss their experiences with their buddy. Then they should video the three steps with themselves in action, and share and discuss the videos with their buddy, commenting reciprocally on both good points and points for improvement.

Block E covers the Plenary (which over time becomes the Community of Enquiry) and Thought for the Week (intended to explore Generalisation to the real world). Again, there are brief demonstration videos of each step, which are then tried out and then discussed with the buddy. After this, the participant videos themselves and discussed the video reciprocally with their buddy. This concludes the basic core of P4C, and the buddying pair may wish to take the opportunity to discuss their progress and raise any questions with a wider group of participants.

Block F covers Metacognition (How Did We do That?) and extending P4C to controversial hot topics in real life. Again, there are brief demonstration videos of each activity, in the four age categories. After viewing these, the participant tries these out and

then discusses with their buddy. Then the participant makes a video of themselves and discusses that with their buddy reciprocally. As these stages are more complex, the participant may then want to discuss in a whole group, as their buddy may no longer be offering sufficiently deep critique.

Block G is concerned with assessment, which is done by peer assessment. Don't worry about reliability, as peer assessment is just as reliable as teacher assessment. The participant (and their buddy) should send two videos of themselves going through the whole P4C process to another pair via an electronic repository, and reciprocal peer assessment should take place. The videos need not be perfect practice, as the participant is also able to comment on aspects that they feel they should have improved. The other pair will agree a grade for the participant's performance, usually either "Fit for Practice" or less often "Exceptional" (meaning a performance which could be used as a demonstration in subsequent courses). Either of these grades leads to a Certificate of Performance in Philosophy for Children. In addition, the conversation leading to this grade can be recorded and submitted as evidence. Anyone who thinks they may not pass should record their conversation for subsequent investigation. If participants do not pass first time, they can seek to be peer assessed again later by another pair.

Over time participants can keep in touch with their buddies and discuss or exchange further videos for discussion, in order to ensure their procedure keeps sharp and up-to-date, and extends to new and perhaps more challenging groups of participants. However, these developments would not be assessed.

A word about time-scales. Most of the early blocks are separated by about a month (although the speed of progress can be decided by agreement between the participant and their buddy). When we get to F and G, however, these blocks are separated by three months, indicating that it is likely to take longer to develop these more sophisticated levels of

functioning. Thus, the whole course would take about eleven months. Teachers would of course have to fit this into the pattern of school terms and semesters.

Delivery and Extending Relevance to Other Countries and Languages

So, who might deliver this course? One option might be a charity, which devoted some of its scarce resources to the initial investment required to create materials and put the course online, then over time manage and coordinate the course for the participants.

However, the structure described fits well into the idea of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), which many universities have been delivering free of charge in recent years as a community good.

What about other countries where English is not a familiar language? Apart from changes according to cultural context, the language may need changing. This would be a massive task, especially if new videos need to be created showing pupils in local classes looking as if they come from the right country. However, to translate the two information-giving blocks into the native language would not be too time-consuming. The planning rubric would also need translating. In the short run, it may however be easier for other countries to keep the videos but overdub them in the native language, or add subtitles in the native language. All of the other process interaction could of course easily be in the native language.

Conclusion

So, does this online peer assessed course sound feasible? Obviously, I think it does. All we need is a charity or a university to volunteer to do the work and put it online.

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Keith Topping - Biographical Details

Keith Topping is Professor of Educational and Social Research in the School of Education at the University of Dundee. His research interests include peer learning (including peer tutoring and peer assessment), parents as educators, problematic behaviour and social competence, computer assisted learning and assessment, and inclusion. He has over 400 publications in 15 languages, including 26 books and over 200 peer reviewed journal papers.

Further details are at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith_James_Topping and <https://www.dundee.ac.uk/esw/staff/details/toppingkeith-j-.php#tab-bio>.