Teaching Philosophy by
Teaching Philosophy Teaching

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What is the most effective way to teach college students philosophy? While philosophers have different positions on this, as on every, question—some favor using historical texts and others philosophical problems as the best means—philosophers have generally been rather conservative in their thinking about this issue. In one way or another, they have rather unreflectively focused on their own professional activities as a philosopher and attempted to teach philosophy by getting students to mimic those aspects of their practices that they deemed central to philosophy itself.

In this paper, I want to suggest an alternative to the standard approaches. I shall argue that teaching college students to teach philosophy to elementary school children can be an especially effective means of teaching college students philosophy. My argument is based on the experience I had teaching a course in which twelve Mount Holyoke College students were required to teach philosophy to first and fifth-grade students at a local elementary school. In discussing the experience of my college students, I will show that they learned more about philosophy by having to teach it than they often have in other courses I have taught in which I have adopted one of the more usual methodologies outlined above. I will also suggest a hypothesis about why this might be so.

Although at first blush the idea that teaching students to teach philosophy is an effective means of teaching them philosophy may seem surprising, upon reflection it becomes clear that it need not be. Often, professors remark that they never really understood a philosophical text until they had to teach it. I suggest that we need to learn from this common experience, for it suggests that our students, as well as ourselves, will learn philosophy best not by doing it—as in writing papers or participating in class discussions—but by teaching
it, as most contemporary philosophers do. And one particular milieu in which this learning can take place is that of teaching elementary school children philosophy.

**Philosophy for Children**

Since many philosophers may find the idea of teaching philosophy at the elementary school level perplexing, let me begin with a brief discussion of this possibility. The most well known program for teaching philosophy to elementary school children was developed by Professor Matthew Lipman, founder of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University. Upset that the contemporary American educational system was failing our children, Lipman sought to rectify this situation by bringing philosophy into the elementary schools. His idea was that students who became educated in the give and take of philosophical discussion would find school more engaging as they learned the skills necessary to become active citizens in a democratic society.

To further his goals, Lipman wrote a series of philosophical novels that form the basis of the philosophy discussions that elementary school students take part in. His first novel was *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. (Lipman, 1980.) “Harry Stottlemeier” is a homophone for “Aristotle” and the discovery that Harry makes is that of logic in the sense of rules for correct reasoning, a discovery made by Aristotle nearly 2500 years ago. The book follows its fifth-grade hero as he discusses a variety of philosophical issues with his friends and classmates.

Lipman’s idea was that fifth-grade students could be drawn into philosophical discussions subsequent to their reading or being read short sections of his novel. Central to his methodology was the establishment of what he called the *community of inquiry*. Based on the ideas of the American pragmatists, especially C. S. Peirce, this methodology lets students set the agenda for their philosophical discussions. The teacher, rather than dispensing knowledge, facilitates the discussion by making sure that students articulate their views clearly, support them with valid arguments, and criticize opposing views in a rational manner.

A philosophical discussion based on *Harry Stottlemeier* might begin with Harry’s discovery that “All” sentences—like “All mammals are animals”—cannot be reversed, while “No” sentences—like “No tigers are bears”—can be. When students have been read the section of the novel in which this discovery takes place, they might respond by trying to figure out why this is true or to come up with a general rule specifying which sentences can be reversed and which not. As they do this, they are beginning to reflect on principles of
logical argumentation, the main topic Lipman wants children to think about and come to understand through discussing this novel.

Lipman's program has been very successful and there are now philosophical novels appropriate for every pre-college grade. The novels have been translated into many languages and there are programs for pre-college philosophy all over the world based on them.

But this is not the only method for teaching philosophy at the elementary school level. Professor Gareth Matthews of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst has advocated for children's ability to do philosophy for over two decades. Although Matthews adopts different techniques for teaching children depending on their age, one method he favors at the elementary school level employs children's literature. Many children's stories focus on philosophically problematic concepts. For example, in "Cookies," from Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad Together* (Lobel, 1972), the contradictory nature of the concept of will power—defined by Toad as "not doing what you want to do"—is highlighted. Frog and Toad try various unsuccessful strategies to keep themselves from eating all of the cookies Toad has baked, such as putting them out of reach on a tall cabinet. Each time, Toad prides himself on his will power while Frog shows him that the cookies are not as inaccessible as he had thought. Finally, in despair, Toad leaves the cookies outside for the birds to devour. Sad that he now has no more cookies left, he reassures himself that, at least, he now has a lot of will power. (Frog, ever contrary, goes home to bake some more for himself.)

This delightfully clever story illustrates for children the difficulties of explaining what will power is. After reading them the story, the facilitator can ask them questions that will allow them to discuss among themselves the peculiarities of this concept. A sample question might be, "Can you actually not do something that you really want to do?" Children find issues such as this intriguing and enjoy discussing them with one another. They can learn to have a discussion of such issues that will include backing up their ideas with reasons and objecting to other views with counter-examples. According to Matthews, children have a natural propensity to philosophize that can be supported and enhanced with a program of teaching philosophy at the elementary school level.

Because my own involvement in the philosophy for children movement has focused on training teachers to teach philosophy to their pupils—I have taught teachers how to teach philosophy both in the Kelly School in Holyoke and, more recently, in the Jackson Street School in Northampton—I have opted to use children's literature as the vehicle for teaching philosophy. While I admire Lipman's books and his ideas for revolutionizing education by introducing a graduated
philosophy curriculum, my goal of getting classroom teachers to teach philosophy has been facilitated by using masterpieces of children's literature as the vehicle for initiating philosophical discussions (these need not be old and venerated; a recent work by Toni Morrison, The Big Box, is as much a masterpiece as is Crockett Johnson's classic, Harold and the Purple Crayon).

One of the most important reasons for this is that I have employed books that the teachers have independent reasons for wanting their students to read. As a result, it has been easier for them to integrate philosophy into the rest of their curriculum. In an age in which teachers are facing increased demands from standardized testing, they are more likely to teach philosophy when doing so employs materials that they have other reasons for teaching and that fit into their established curricular goals.

Another advantage is that books can be chosen that allow teachers to address issues that they want to address. When I was working with Mary Cowhey at the Jackson Street School, she was interested in using The Big Box because it raised issues about freedom and how adults curtailed the freedom of children. The handsomely illustrated book tells the story of a number of different children, each of whom has his or her freedom taken away by a different group of adults by being placed in a large box-like room with a "door that only opens one way." In the box, the kids have many playthings, but they only get to visit with their parents on one evening a week. And they cannot see anyone else who is not in the box. Mary thought this book raised issues that were germane to her curriculum—she wants students to puzzle over the nature of freedom—so together we fashioned questions to use with her students.

There is opposition to this methodology from people trained in the community of inquiry model because they believe that beginning a discussion with a question that does not come from the children themselves will rob them of their ownership of the discussion. I have two responses: First, this is not my experience when using this model. For example, asking students what someone would have to give them in order for them to volunteer to be in the big box brings a flood of eager responses from the children, who are eager to tell me what their favorite game or food is. I have not had any sense that asking a question that elicits their feelings or ideas, a question that is open ended and does not have a right or wrong answer, quells student interest. Second, the questions allow teachers who have not had extensive training in teaching philosophy to children to have a guide in how to lead a philosophical discussion. Again, my experience is that teachers want to have something to use to plan out how a discussion will go when they begin to teach philosophy to their elementary school
pupils. This method provides them with a guide for their discussions at the same time that it highlights philosophical issues in the stories for the pupils to think about.

Teaching to Teach

My goal in this paper is not to justify teaching elementary school children philosophy but rather to show that having college students do so is a good way to teach them philosophy. This was something I discovered as a result of teaching a course in the fall semester of 2001 in which I required my students to do just that. The course was an upper-level seminar at Mount Holyoke College, a small, women’s liberal arts college located in South Hadley, Massachusetts. The goal of the course was to have the college students teach philosophy to first- and fifth-graders at the Jackson Street School, a public elementary school located in Northampton, Massachusetts, a few miles from Mount Holyoke.

I got the idea of teaching this course because of my own involvement in training teachers at Jackson Street to teach philosophy. For the previous three years, I had been working with teachers to develop curricular materials for teaching philosophy at various different elementary school levels. Why not, I thought, have my students go into classrooms and do the sort of teaching that I had been doing?

What seemed a simple solution to the problem of my being asked to go into more classrooms than I could manage turned out not to be a solution to that problem at all. Instead, what emerged was a very different type of course in which I trained my college students to teach philosophy. The classrooms in which I placed them were the classrooms of two teachers with whom I had been working. But whereas I had formed partnerships with these teachers, working to foster the development of their own skills as elementary school philosophy teachers, my students worked together as teams to teach philosophy to their pupils more or less independently of the classroom teachers.

I found developing this idea into a specific curriculum for students rather daunting. Because this course involved college students actually interacting with a larger public—the elementary school children, their teachers and administrators—I found myself worrying about all sorts of issues that normally did not concern me. For example, I was concerned that students would make inappropriate assumptions about the lives of the pupils that could be demeaning. In this particular case, Gwen Agna, the principal at Jackson Street, gave the students an idea of the issues they would face, thereby diminishing the likelihood that they would assume, for example, that all of the families from which the students came were standard nuclear ones, rather than single parent or with two parents of the same gender. Still,
we skirted difficult issues, as when a college student, in discussing *The Giving Tree*, asked the pupils if they had given things to the school's giving tree, seeming to assume that none of the students had been recipients of the others' largess.

But with the assistance and advice of a variety of colleagues, the basic structure of my course emerged. The course consisted of two large units. The first lasted nine weeks during which it met one day a week for three hours in a Mount Holyoke College classroom. Each three-hour session was divided in half. For the first ninety minutes, we discussed readings written by experts in the field of philosophy for children that laid out the rationale for teaching school children philosophy while also illustrating various different techniques for doing so. During these segments, I introduced my students to all the different methodologies with which I was acquainted for teaching philosophy at the pre-college level. For the second ninety minutes, the students had a more hands on experience of developing their own skills as teachers of philosophy for elementary school children. So, in our first session I read "Cookies" to the class and conducted a discussion more or less along the lines that I wanted the students themselves to use when they went into the elementary school classrooms. Later, as the students got the idea of what was expected, I broke the class into two groups and the students got to practice leading philosophical discussions among their peers under the watchful eyes of myself and two assistants. My hope was that these sessions would prepare them for leading philosophical discussion at the Jackson Street School.

The course's second unit consisted of four sessions at the school. The students were divided into four groups of three students and each group led philosophical discussions among roughly eight or nine elementary school children. We divided two elementary school classes in half in order to make discussions more manageable. One was Mary Cowhey's first-grade class; the other, Susan Fink's fifth-grade class. The philosophy discussions lasted about thirty minutes for the first-graders and forty-five minutes for the fifth-graders. After the discussions, the seminar reconvened in the Conference Room at the school to discuss how things had gone and to plan for the following week.

In thinking about why this course was such an effective means of increasing the college students' understanding of philosophy, it is important to recognize the variety of different tasks that my students were asked to undertake. First, they had to become acquainted with the idea of teaching philosophy to children. Many of them were somewhat skeptical about doing this, or else had mistaken ideas about what would take place. For example, a number envisioned themselves giving short lectures to the elementary school pupils about Kant on lying or Plato on the forms, an idea that they were loath to give up.
In order to acquaint them with what they would actually be doing, I employed some standard techniques: assigning readings on the subject that formed the take-off point for discussions and having guest presentations by Matthew Lipman (via a video conference) and Gareth Matthews (who gave a lecture/discussion). These sessions gave my students the opportunity to discuss questions they had with two of the philosophers whose work they had read. In addition to acquainting the students with two different models for teaching philosophy at the pre-college level, the opportunity to talk to two leaders in this field was exciting to the students and fueled their already growing enthusiasm for the undertaking.

At the same time that I was familiarizing my students with the idea that school children would benefit from being taught to discuss philosophical problems, I was training them in the specific methodology that they would be using to lead discussions at Jackson Street Central here was their practicing facilitating discussions among their fellow students. As I’ve said, the idea was that these sessions would provide them with some experience in leading philosophical discussions, though I recognized from the start that these discussions would only be rough approximations of the situation the students would face when they went into the elementary school classrooms. Still, this was an important aspect of their training without which I don’t think they would have been at all prepared to go into the school. If nothing else, they learned that leading a discussion required preparation and concentration. A side benefit of this was a new respect they had for teaching as a profession. I recall one student who, after what was for her a particularly difficult session, came up to me and said, “You know, I never realized how difficult teaching actually is!”

When my students went into the school classrooms, I wanted them to be teaching stories that they felt were philosophically significant. Each of them was therefore required to find a story that she thought met this criterion and to develop teaching materials for that story. The teaching materials, modeled on those produced by Matthews, consisted of a question set that posed a series of questions around which to structure a philosophical discussion as well as a teacher’s guide that would provide teachers with an overview of the philosophical issues raised by the story and the question set. Although I emphasized the utility of the teachers’ guides to teachers, I also had in mind that writing them would require the students to think carefully about the philosophical issues raised by their stories.

While we developed these materials for use when we went into Jackson Street, they are also now available on the web for general use by teachers <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/omc/kidsphil/index.html>. Indeed, one benefit that I could point to for the teachers who allowed
us to come into their classrooms was that they would have access to all the materials my students developed as a result of their cooperation.

Once the students had developed their question sets, we tested them in our class, as I have mentioned, by having discussions based upon them. As well as allowing the students to see which questions might work and which might not, it also provided them with valuable experience in leading a classroom discussion based on a children's story. As they refined their sets, they thus gained the experience I wanted them to have before they went into the schools. Given the time required for these discussions, students had to meet in groups outside of class to ensure that everyone had sufficient experience at leading a discussion as well as adequate feedback on their question sets. (Of course, I also gave written comments on the sets.)

During all this, I also required the students to keep a journal. There were two reasons for this. I wanted them to be thinking about how this course was affecting them, for example, how it might be making them reassess the nature of their own educations. But the journals would also form a resource for them when they came to write the final paper required for the course. That paper asked them to assess their experience as teachers of philosophy to children in a way that took account of the readings that we had done during the semester. I wanted them to have a record of their own reflections to turn to as they sat down at the end of the term to write that paper. Twice during the semester, they had to pass in the journals for assessment and comments by my mentor, Mount Holyoke's term for an undergraduate student assistant.

Of course, the central experience of the course for the college students was going into the Jackson Street School classrooms and teaching philosophy to the elementary-school students. Each of the four groups that I divided the class into had a facilitator, a scribe, and an observer/critic. The facilitator read the story to the children and then posed the questions and managed the discussion. The scribe wrote down the children's comments on a large pad that all of the pupils could read and would also occasionally contribute to the discussion. Not only did recording the pupils' comments provide a reference that was useful for the discussions themselves, but it also provided a record for the students' later use. The observer/critic led the assessment of the session when we reconvened as a seminar following each classroom visit, having taken notes about what worked and what did not as the classroom session progressed. She could also intervene to keep the pupils from misbehaving.

Although I had intended that each student would take on each role at least once during our visits, the classroom teachers convinced me that things would go smoother if the same student led the discussion each week. They thought that this would lead to greater continuity
for their pupils, allowing them to warm up to my students and thus be willing to discuss issues in a more open and genuine manner. Although initially I was disappointed at having to modify my plans in this way, it did allow me to choose the four students who I thought had performed best in our trial runs as the ones to facilitate the elementary school discussions.

In the Classroom

How did my students fare in their attempts to teach philosophy at Jackson Street? At one level, they were completely successful in that they were able to generate tremendous excitement for philosophy among their pupils. The fifth-grade students in particular were very enthusiastic about their philosophy lessons and pressed their teacher to have us come back the next term to follow up on some issues they wanted to discuss further.

On the negative side, I felt that the discussions they led did not always focus on the philosophical issues that were raised by the stories. Though the school pupils did develop a stronger sense of community as well as a clearer understanding of the principles of argumentation, I felt that there was more potential than was always achieved in our discussions. The classroom teachers informed me that our sessions did have significant impact on their students, although often this came out most clearly a day or two after a particular discussion when the pupils would return to a question they did not feel they had discussed adequately.

In order to illustrate what actually transpired, I turn now to a philosophical discussion that took place with a group of fifth graders in Susan Fink's class at the Jackson Street School on November 26, 2001. The story that was read to the students was Perfect the Pig by Susan Jeschke. It is the story of a flying pig who gets abducted by a man who puts him in a cage and treats him badly. My students thought that this story would be a good way to get the elementary school students to think about our justification for keeping animals in cages and, even, whether imprisoning human beings was all right. The students posed a series of questions to the group that they had devised during our practice sessions.

The facilitator, Janet, began by asking the pupils to name an animal that was kept in a cage.

- Samuel: Hamster
- Justine: Tiger
- Jose: Guinea Pigs
- Maria: Mice
Frank: Most species
This is a typical question that we use to get as many students involved in the discussion as possible. It does not require much of the students, but gets them talking as part of their group.

Having begun the discussion, the group wanted to move toward a more philosophic issue, whether and when it was justified to put animals in cages. Janet asked the fifth graders, "When Perfect got lost he was found by a man who took him home, fed him garbage, chased him with a belt, tied him up, and finally put him in a cage. Do you think it was okay to put Perfect in a cage?"

Maria: No, if you put him in a cage he won't feel comfortable.
Marty [the group's note-taker]: Perfect wasn't used to a cage.
Janet: Is keeping pigs in a pen okay?
Maria: Pens are not like cages. Cages have a top and bottom; there's no space in cages.
Frank: Pens are bigger and don't have tops.

The students have already proposed a criterion for what an enclosure must be like in order for it to be all right to put an animal in it. It must be large enough for the animal. When Janet went on to ask whether there should be cages at all, the students went on to provide further justification for putting animals in enclosures:

Justine: Some animals are dangerous. Some can't live on their own.
Samuel: Some animals belong in cages. Some are tamed and some are not tame.

At this point, the pupils have begun to develop rationales for why some animals are put in cages. They have moved from simply expressing their opinions to articulating the reasons for their beliefs. Justine's claim that dangerous animals and ones that cannot survive on their own need to be in enclosures marks the discussion's movement to a more abstract level.

To encourage this development, Janet follows this up by asking them to consider the morality of the practice: "Is it okay to put an animal in a cage if it is dangerous or not tame? Do some animals not belong in cages?" The pupils responded by distinguishing different cases:

Maria: If you catch a Panda and put it in a cage it feels uncomfortable. It belongs in the wild.
Frank: Domesticated animals sometimes need cages because they don't know anything about the wild and can't take care of themselves.

Here we have an example of two pupils having different views about the legitimacy of putting animals in enclosures. Although there is no conflict between their views because their claims concern different animals, it is clear that they are thinking through issues in the field of animal rights.
In their practice sessions, my students wanted to link the issue of putting animals in enclosures to the problem of imprisoning human beings. Janet began a discussion of that problem. The discussion continued for a while, moving back and forth between the question of keeping animals enclosed and doing a similar thing to human beings. Toward the end, one of the students, Frank, summarized the outcome for himself and, I think, the group, when he responded to Janet’s statement, “Sounds like punishment is taking away the things that you like,” with a different emphasis: “Freedom. Taking away freedom like the animal in the cage.”

This summary of the discussion does not do justice to many of the interesting insights made by the pupils about when and why it is legitimate to enclose animals as well as about the legitimacy and efficacy of punishment. I hope that it will nonetheless serve to show that my students managed to facilitate an interesting philosophical discussion among the fifth-grade pupils. The fifth graders were learning how to think about a social practice and to provide justification for it. In addition, they saw that it was possible to criticize a practice for its inhumanity. These are some of the basic elements necessary for philosophical thinking.

A Multi-Dimensional Learning Experience

The question remains why engaging in the process of teaching philosophy to elementary school pupils provided my college students with a valuable experience in their own philosophic careers. As I have said, they seemed to learn more about what philosophy was from this course than they did from other courses I have taught. In the remainder of this paper, I shall reflect on why this might be so.

My hypothesis is that the multi-dimensional learning experience provided by this seminar made it a more effective means of teaching philosophy than more standard courses. Traditional classes at the college level are more or less one-dimensional, requiring students to read texts, understand them critically, and present their understanding for the evaluation of the instructor in papers and/or examinations. I call this type of class one-dimensional because the learning takes place along a single axis, even though it requires multiple skills for students to be successful in learning the material.

I call my course a multi-dimensional learning experience because it involved more than one track along which my students were simultaneously learning and developing. Because of the multiple dimensions to the course, students were more fully involved in the experience than they have been in the more traditional courses I have taught. By
simultaneously mobilizing a variety of different skills and interests, the course gave them a rich and rewarding learning experience.

What were these different dimensions? First, the college students learned to facilitate a philosophical discussion. This was the primary goal of the course and the students were all very serious about acquiring the skills necessary to allow them to be successful teachers of elementary-school-level philosophy. In order to accomplish this, they had to think about various different issues as well as practice a variety of techniques. At the most basic level, they had to think about how to read a story aloud to a group of students in a way that would capture and maintain their interest. The most successful students worked at becoming more animated in their reading. But leading a philosophy discussion requires many other skills that also require practice for their acquisition. For example, one has to learn how to listen to what the students say with an ear to how to move to a more abstract level of questioning, a skill you can see exercised by Janet in the discussion she led of *Perfect the Pig*. Again, the students were thinking about issues like this as they practiced leading discussions among their peers as well as when they taught at Jackson Street.

Almost all of the students in my class, intrigued as they were with the idea of teaching philosophy to elementary-school children, were also somewhat skeptical that this could be done by discussing children’s stories. A second dimension of the course involved reflecting on what philosophy might contribute to a young child’s education and figuring out why children’s literature was a useful means of doing so. Here, the students learned that philosophy involves discussions of important issues and that these issues can be found even in children’s stories.

Because my students were having many philosophical discussions based on children’s stories—ostensibly to provide each other with the experience of leading a philosophical discussion—they were also actually doing philosophy with each other. Although I never mentioned this aspect of the course explicitly, it provided another dimension to their classroom experience. So, for example, when we discussed “Cookies” on the first day of our class, the students became engaged in an intense discussion of will power. Beginning with an amusing story, the students found themselves having a sophisticated philosophical discussion about what constituted will power. For homework that week, I asked the students to read an article from *Analysis* entitled, “Frog and Toad Lose Control,” in which two professional philosophers, Jeanette Kennett and Michael Smith, attempt to provide a definition of will power using this story as the basis for their argument (Kennett and Smith 1996). It is a complex article and one that requires a great deal of philosophical sophistication to understand. It also develops an account of will power that I see as flawed, so that the class continued to regard the issue of what will power is as an open one.
This sequence of experiences and assignments had a huge impact on my students, a number of whom, as I have mentioned, had come into this class thinking that they would be giving the Jackson Street pupils the benefits of their philosophical sophistication. They were really taken aback to see that an apparently simple children’s story could lead not only to their having an interesting and contentious discussion about what will power is, but that professional philosophers could use it as a means to developing a precise account of will power that itself could be an object for their philosophical scrutiny. This is just one example of how the practical aspects of the course—learning to teach philosophy—fostered other dimensions of the students’ learning—here, getting them to engage in genuine philosophical reflection on a problem that they came to see as needing more investigation.

A further dimension was provided by the students reconceptualizing their understanding of philosophy as a discipline. I was surprised when, at the end of the semester, a number of students told me that they had come away from the course with a transformed understanding of what philosophy as an academic subject matter was. For example, one of my students had been wedded to the idea that philosophy required understanding which great philosopher had articulated what position on certain central problems, and for what reasons. In her final paper, she reported that she had come to believe that what she was teaching the elementary school students—to express, defend, and criticize their own beliefs—was the real essence of philosophy. Other students reported, albeit in less dramatic fashion, that they had acquired a more clear understanding of what philosophy really was from the course.

In addition to these dimensions, the students also began reflecting on the nature of education, seeing the American system of education more critically than they had before. At a basic level, the students reported that having to teach others gave them a new understanding of what was involved in teaching. More significantly, involvement in a methodology that one student dubbed, “teaching without answers,” made them see their own educations as having involved too much rote learning instead of the intellectual questioning they were bringing to the elementary-school children. A number of them saw this as an important aspect of what made teaching school children philosophy so significant.

Some students used the course to reflect on other issues, thereby making the course all the richer for them as individuals. One student in particular, a psychology major, wound up deeply involved in a critique of that discipline’s use of developmental models that condescended to elementary-school students in ways that she thought her own experience at Jackson Street contradicted. For example, she reported that her fifth-grade students were capable of putting themselves into the place of others in a moral disagreement, something
that psychologists from Piaget to Kohlberg deemed impossible. This student’s own intellectual interest in developmental psychology thus added another dimension to her own intellectual journey in the course and resulted in a first-rate term paper.

My own sense, then, was that “Teaching Children Philosophy” was so successful because it gave the students a much more complex educational experience than a standard philosophy course. In so far as it engaged more facets of the students than usual courses, it affected them more deeply. As I said, I have not figured out how this awareness will alter the teaching that I do in other courses, but it certainly makes me think that teaching college students how to teach philosophy to elementary-school children is an important but neglected aspect of the philosophy for children movement.

Let me end on a more personal note. What I like best about teaching children philosophy is that you can have a discussion about an important philosophical issue that is not encumbered by texts that the students have a difficult time understanding. In my own classes, such as Existentialism or the History of Modern European Philosophy, I have to work so hard to get the students to understand, say, Locke’s solution to the free-will problem that we seem to have little energy left for a free-wheeling philosophical discussion of that problem. (I have solved this somewhat by introducing debates into my courses, but that’s another story.) So it’s very refreshing to be able to lead a philosophical discussion in which students get to express their views, criticize the views of others, and defend their own views against such criticism without first having to struggle past or through a difficult text.

Of course, as someone very interested in the history of philosophy, I reject the view, held by some analytic philosophers, that the history of philosophy is not really important for contemporary philosophy. A complete philosophical education requires that students become familiar with how the great philosophers of the Western tradition (and also other traditions) answered the central questions of human existence that we call philosophical. Like it or not, we are not in the position of Socrates’ students, for whom there was not an established tradition of thought to be mastered.

Nonetheless, my involvement with teaching children philosophy has made me realize that complex philosophical texts, although perhaps a source of understanding for the professional philosopher and even the serious philosophy student, can be a barrier to thought for many students. What philosophy for children has taught me, among other things, is that even college students can be made to love philosophy by beginning with children’s literature.
Notes

1. For a full listing of the novels, visit the Institute’s website: http://www.montclair.edu/pages/iapc/home.html.
2. See, for example, Matthews 1980. Matthews also writes a column on philosophy in children’s literature in the Institute’s journal, Thinking.
3. Particularly useful to me were trainings offered under the auspices of the Teagle Foundation Seminar on Community-Based Learning Classes at Hampshire College and of the College Compact offered through the American Philosophical Association.
4. I was quite fortunate that, in addition to having an undergraduate “mentor” to assist with this class, I had the benefit of Pat Mills of the University of Massachusetts, who graciously volunteered to assist me.

Bibliography


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