

# Reflections From Teachers on Philosophy and Teaching

## Philosophy and the Classroom Teacher

By Linda Oho

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Philosophy for Children has been an intimate part of my life for more than a decade. It is with deliberate thought and intent that I have chosen to use this word as it best describes the impact that philosophy has had in my life. It was not always the case that I viewed philosophy to be interesting or useful to me. Rudyard Kipling once wrote, "East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet." This adage seemed to appropriately describe what I believed to be true with regard to the world of the classroom teacher and that of the philosopher. Like a Venn diagram that shares no common space, these two worlds appeared so unrelated to one another that it was almost plausible for me to perceive them as entirely separate entities. However, as life would have it, in learning to face all its difficulties and joys, I found myself turning to philosophy to better understand myself as a person. My appreciation for Philosophy for Children did not come all at once. It was after many years of teaching had passed before things began to fall into place for me. Factors, both professional and personal, came into play to fertilize my soil in anticipation for this journey.

On a professional level, at least three events stand out in my mind. The first seed was planted when I was in my third year of teaching. It was an event that created some doubt in my mind and, at the same time, piqued my curiosity. I enjoyed being in the classroom with my children, and

I taught them conscientiously as I had been taught as a student and as a pre-service teacher. The transmission model of teacher as the vessel of knowledge and student as receptor of that knowledge prevailed. This was the frame of reference from which I measured myself. It was in those early years of teaching that I remember puzzling over how I would challenge my first graders to think. I asked questions from the back of the basal reader and felt very uncomfortable about the rigidity and narrow exchange of ideas that occurred. The most frightening part of all was the realization that I did not have the skills necessary to proficiently model a level and quality of thinking that would help my students to pursue their own thoughts at a deeper level. Not knowing where or how to address this concern, I quietly put it to rest somewhere in the back of my mind. As I continued to teach in the system, much like quicksand, I sank deeper and deeper into the rigid schedules, demands and procedures that were part and parcel of the Department of Education. Being a neophyte teacher at the time, I was soon thrust into a new school on a new grade level with new curriculum to learn. While this concern had not yet been addressed, nor was it at the forefront of my thoughts, it was never forgotten.

The second event which occurred in my professional career was the introduction of whole language. I began to attend workshops that introduced me to the concept of the whole child. This was all new to me as my pre-service years were dominated by the developmental approach of Piaget, whose theory emphasized optimal stages of learning. When a child reached one of these stages, then they were "ready" to be taught. Whole language, on the other hand, approached learning from a different point of view. Children were exposed to concepts using the venue of personal experience as a way of helping students gain meaning in their learning. While I did not wholeheartedly buy into all aspects of how one educated the whole child, there were ideas

and principles embedded in this philosophy that resonated with my evolving, personal philosophy of education. Those who saw the value of educating the whole child through "whole language," struggled to put it into practice within a system that valued a more "lock-step" method to learning. There was also much resistance from colleagues who could not see outside of the box from which they were taught. At that time, many of us who took these workshops were under the impression that "whole language" was a revolutionary idea. With minimum guidance, I attempted to duplicate a classroom where choices were given and children's voices would be heard. Albeit seeing the joy in their faces as they engaged in their work was rewarding, it was also a major struggle to set up a classroom modeled on democracy when the knowledge gained was vague and limited to what was learned in these workshops. It was not until many years later that I realized that the concept of the whole child was grounded in the educational research of John Dewey. Knowing that "whole language" was grounded in Dewey's works would have alleviated some of my doubts and provided me with the needed guidance to better understand democracy in the classroom setting.

The third, and probably the most influential event that further nourished my thinking came just a few years later. I had heard about the project called Philosophy for Children or P4C. It focused on helping students to develop their abilities to think for themselves in responsible ways. This was to be accomplished by the "doing" of philosophical inquiry within a community. The internalization of these thinking skills would come with practice, and over time the application of these skills to other disciplines would become second nature. In this project, the development of higher order thinking skills is encouraged in the community of inquiry, nestled within a safe place. This was a place where all voices were valued and respected. It is within this setting that members of the community reflect and engage in inquiry that is both dynamic and relevant to their own lives. The ideas that I valued in the education of the whole child seemed to dovetail with the essential elements of Philosophy for Children. As a result, I decided to enroll in the workshop. Even after "doing" philosophy with my children for a couple of years, I had not yet internalized what it meant to engage in a philosophical discussion. I was still operating under the assumption that learning to do higher order thinking was no different than learning any other methodology. The expectation that I would follow some prescribed approach that

would yield the desired results, clearly, did not materialize. In fact, because the parameters of P4C were different from that of a traditional curriculum, I struggled to understand and "master" it. Such a mentality presumed that one would be able to take from the outside and somehow magically transform the way students think. Then in 1992, I had the opportunity of a lifetime to work under the mentorship of Dr. Thomas Jackson of the Philosophy Department on the Manoa campus. While I felt honored to work with Dr. J, I was also a little apprehensive as my vision of what it meant to be involved in philosophy was of an esoteric nature. I began to question myself and thinking, "What am I doing here?" Although I had been in the project for two years, I felt like a fraud. What did I know about philosophy? My only experience had been an introductory course back when I was a college student. For the most part, I studied the



thoughts of famous philosophers and what was elucidated throughout history. These profound thoughts certainly did not enter or exist in my own mind. I wondered and worried about how I would do justice to my job and be a credible source of support and help to others.

On a personal level, as I continued to work on this project, I slowly became more and more cognizant of the close relationship between philosophy and myself as a person as I began to value my own thinking. This change within me came when a gentle soul, disguised as a philosopher, literally took me by the hand and ushered me into a place that was always unintelligible, unsafe and terrifying to me in the past. I think back of the time when I was at Dr.

Jackson's home. In his very down to earth manner, he was explaining to Chris, another teacher in the project, and me about Plato's allegory of the cave. Just the idea of discussing philosophical matters felt uncomfortable and out of place to me. But on that day, as Dr. J patiently and humorously walked us through that allegory, I found a new window opening up in my mind. Like the people chained in Plato's cave, our reality is based on the belief that what we are experiencing is real. If for a moment one were to accept Plato's thinking that what we believe to be reality are merely shadows, one could either go into denial and continue to exist in the same way, or one could begin to challenge that thought. The acceptance of the status quo without question places one in a passive state. At some level, the

connection between thoughts and actions would be obvious, but the examination of that relationship would appear redundant and pointless. On the other hand, challenging that thought would compel one to raise questions about practices and ideas that are often taken for granted as truth. I spent a great deal of time thinking about this allegory, and I recognized myself in that cave. At that point in my life, taking risks and making changes were not high on my priority list. My fears were based on two beliefs. The first had to do with security. I believed that I was safe, secure and happy so why would I feel the need to risk or make changes that threatened my comfort zone? As it was, the need for me to step outside of this zone came not by my own choosing. Because life's wind can shift at any given moment, what was once calm and peaceful became a turbulent, unsettling place to be. Understanding the nature of change as being part of life has allowed me to loosen the chains of security that I once held onto so tightly. The second belief was that things were always done in a particular way and, therefore, that must be the only way to do it. When changes occur, whether expected or unexpected, the need to adjust and adapt becomes critical to one's survival, and the familiar ways of resolving problems may no longer be useful. The allegory of the cave allowed me to examine myself and situations that opened my mind to different options and perspectives. I began to recognize and understand my own fears a little better. Each day I would remind myself to continue to loosen my own chains because I know how easy it is to fall back into that place where we begin to believe only in shadows. Perhaps people, in general, deny their state of captivity or choose to remain chained because it is the easier thing to do. Becoming liberated from these chains requires one to be vigilant, always tending to the fires that seek truth. Being mindful to this fire is paramount lest one fall back into captivity. Philosophy for Children has brought a heightened awareness of the quality of one's power to think as it affects one's actions. When Socrates says that the unexamined life is not worth living, it now holds incredible meaning to me and I have come to understand the wisdom behind these words. While words of wisdom may come from an extrinsic source, it is not wisdom to the individual until it becomes personally meaningful. For me, Philosophy for Children has provided me a way to think about life, strengthening that connection between my thoughts and my actions, allowing me to grow both personally and professionally. Eleven years have passed since I questioned and doubted my ability to do this work. I have yet to "arrive" as my journey continues to unfold, reminding me that there is much to learn. I have come to the conclusion that perhaps one never "arrives" because it is the journey, itself, that brings growth to one's life. I now realize that the world of the classroom teacher and the philosopher, indeed, are not separate entities but exist and evolve together as one. The knowledge that philosophy is an integral part of my life and defines who I am, are my credentials for doing this work that I love.

## P4C: The Four C's in Philosophy for Children

By Elaine Roumasset

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The Philosophy in the Schools Project in Hawaii is founded on an intellectually safe community of children where inquiry occurs and where no one person knows or has *the* answer(s). Philosophy for Children promotes four C's: Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Caring Thinking and Children's Thinking. Many programs focus on one or two of these areas, but P4C is the first and only program, to my knowledge, that addresses all four areas, thus making it a philosophy for living, i.e., an intellectually safe community of children where thinking and wonder are encouraged.

When P4C was first mentioned at a faculty meeting at my school as a means to promote and improve critical thinking amongst the students, I was one of its biggest critics because I had already suffered through two philosophy classes as an undergraduate student at the university and both were so boring and inapplicable to my world. So, how was I to teach a class of second graders philosophy when I myself couldn't get stimulated as a college student? The two teachers who urged us to adopt this program were well-respected seasoned faculty members and we trusted their judgment. We, therefore, agreed to investigate this project and invited its Hawaii founder, Dr. Thomas Jackson from the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawaii to talk to us. What he shared with us was so unlike the classes I had taken in his very own department. Dr. Jackson talked about children engaged in conversation in an intellectually "safe" place. Children and adults alike would sit in a circle and build a community in our classrooms where critical and creative thinking were encouraged and ideas were supported with reasons. It would be similar to King Arthur's round table where there would be no head and everyone would be equal. I could not believe what I was hearing. There would be no lecturing and no memorization of philosophers' names and their claim to fame. After an intensive week of training of the entire faculty that summer we welcomed philosophy graduate students into our rooms one period a week for a year to help guide us through this project. They would be the philosophy teachers modeling for us how to promote inquiry in this community circle. We, in turn, would help to keep the students focused and engaged while also being a part of the community of inquirers. What proceeded to happen was incredible. Children participated in an intellectual discussion like I had never heard or seen before. They were sharing their ideas about things I never dreamed they were capable of or even interested in. They

talked about what was real and not real, what was beyond the blue sky, and whether they could have more than one name and if changing their names would change who they were. They discussed things to which I *thought* I knew all the answers and no discussion was necessary. I remember the first session when the question, “If you jumped off a three-story building would you be hurt?” was posed. My immediate thought was, “Of course you’d be hurt!” Any dummy could tell you that. Then came a student’s reply, “No, not necessarily.” My eyes almost popped out of my head. I thought, “What? Are you insane? Maybe you don’t know how high three stories really are.” The student then followed up with his reason. “If I were wearing a parachute I may not get hurt.” And then another student, upon hearing the first, responded with, “Not if there were a mattress at the bottom that could cushion my fall like for a stuntman.” I then realized that maybe I don’t have all the answers and it really was not necessary. So began my introduction to P4C. I realized that learning is a two-way process between student and teacher.

P4C also taught me about the necessity for “think time” for students and the importance of seeking reasons behind their statements. I have seen students come up with profound ideas given the time to formulate them. Because the vocabulary of second graders is limited, it is sometimes harder for them to express what they are thinking. As Dr. Jackson continues to iterate, “We aren’t in a hurry to get there, but we’ll get there. Frequently simple statements made by students are packed with logical reasoning that teachers fail to investigate because the students’ ideas fall “outside the box” and are misunderstood as responses that do not make sense. We need to slow down and take the time to listen to what these students want to say.

So, when I was recently asked to address the question, “Why do you teach Philosophy for Children?” I excitedly accepted. However, I think one would get a better sense of its impact on education and the reason for my teaching it for more than ten years from my second graders when I posed a similar question to them. I asked, “What would the world be like if there were no P4C?” One child answered, “Children would not be able to learn and think. It is really good to stretch your mind because if you don’t stretch your mind then it will be hard to think. I also think P4C is important because it lets air into our minds to think.” Discussions that occur during a P4C session expand their thinking process and one sees creative thinking occurring. The students begin to think outside of the box and start looking at the many possibilities of any given situation, i.e., as in the earlier example of the session when students were asked about jumping off of a three-story building. They become creative thinkers and because they are not taught to put limits on their thinking, the discussion becomes richly innovative and thought provoking. The students begin to think like inventors, artists, composers, poets or any other creative genius.

When we evaluate our philosophy session at the end of the period we see whether critical and/or creative thinking

occurred by asking them whether or not individuals had “scratched beneath the surface” or not. Students know when they are challenged to think or not and they can discern if the discussion was meaningful or not. The students know when they have given their minds a good workout because there is intellectual sparring occurring. The children question each other by asking, “What do you mean by...?” or ask to have a point clarified. They also learn how to accept each other’s reasons and explanations as either being logical or illogical by giving their own reason(s) for agreeing or disagreeing or by providing counterexamples to show fallacies in their assumptions. Students may also ask someone to explain a point more clearly by saying, “I don’t understand what you are saying. Can you say it again?” After careful listening and evaluating they even change their own minds because they see a more reasonable answer to a question. P4C has empowered children to use inquiry as a means to improve their ability to think and have their voices heard. On occasion we have even skipped recess to continue our inquiry or continued well into the second hour to finish our discussion. P4C provides children with an opportunity to think critically as well as creatively during these inquiry sessions.

Another child wrote, “Nobody will be safe and nobody will learn. Children would be shy. They would not share ideas. If that happened they would not gain knowledge.” At the beginning of the year we talk about how we need to listen to the words and ideas of the person rather than focus on who is the speaker. In other words, just because someone happens to be your friend or not is not a good reason to agree or disagree. It is all right to disagree with a friend because we disagree with what the person has said and not with them as a person. Thus, the seed is planted very early in their minds that it is good to have intellectual discussions. They realize an exchange of ideas can improve their thinking and is healthy if done in a caring and respectful manner. I can safely say my students feel truly safe to share their ideas with one another. In fact, the children feel so safe that in the early years when we were first implementing P4C in the classroom, Dr. Jackson would sit in our inquiry circle and participate as a member of that community. The children knew we were having a university professor visit and yet they felt safe enough to openly disagree with him and give reasons as to why they did so. They would openly explain how they had found a counterexample to his argument. His stature, both physical and intellectual, did not intimidate them in the least because they knew that it was all right to disagree as long as they could support it with good reasons and do it in a caring manner.

So if you ask me why I teach philosophy, I can truly say that it has helped me improve as a teacher. I have become a better listener and I now listen to the students’ voices and what they are saying. Our class discussions are richer with a lot more participation. I no longer accept answers at face value, even from Special Education and ESLL (English for Second Language Learners) students. In P4C

sessions everyone is equal. No one person dominates the conversation or has all the right answers. And, everyone has a voice should they choose to speak. It continues to truly amaze me to see these 7- and 8-year olds discuss a topic without an adult leading them. For many this is a time when they discover their voices and feel secure enough to speak up inside the P4C circle. I have seen this happen with children whose former teachers have told me refuse to speak up. Once they feel the safety of not being condemned for their thoughts and feelings, these students slowly begin to blossom and become active participants in the community. P4C has helped these children to find their safety net. And, their ability to think critically, creatively and caringly has helped them to develop into the person that was hidden from us. P4C is truly remarkable and both teacher and students who have implemented it have realized its worth. When questioning my grandson who was recently involved in a P4C session about what it felt like to have his voice heard by adults, his reply was, "I feel stronger than my daddy."

## Aretêic Philosophy for Children

By Steve Bein

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**P**atience, they say, is a virtue. That may be, but it is certainly not one of mine. Becoming more patient has been annually renewed as my New Year's resolution for some time now, and with little success. I cannot blame the insignificance of my progress in this matter on a lack of advice. On the contrary, those who want to become more patient will never be left wanting for counsel: self-help books and the sagacity of friends and relatives are always available in abundance. The problem, of course, is that in order to develop patience, one needs to be patient enough to apply such wisdom on a sustained basis. I am bound in a catch-22: the only way to develop patience seems to be to have patience in the first place.

There is exactly one activity in life in which I reliably demonstrate patience, and in this arena I feel endowed — much to my own surprise — with almost limitless serenity and tolerance. I am undoubtedly most patient when doing philosophy with children. I know this both introspectively and because of the remarks of others. The teachers I work

with sometimes compliment me on how very patient I am, only to have me correct them — this time to *their* surprise — that this is only true of me in the classroom. In conversation with adults my instinct is to react immediately to anything said which I feel to be incorrect. But when sitting in a circle on the floor of a classroom, the children sitting with me can do no wrong. My first instinct is not to correct but to seek clarification. To my ears the children are almost incapable of saying "stupid" things; they can only say things I am not sure I fully understand, things I am sure I will make sense of once I more fully adopt the child's perspective.

This is certainly not the case for me when speaking with adults. They are more than capable of being stupid; on my less patient days, I seem to be the only adult who can reliably say anything intelligent at all. I am not writing this to insult my readers, nor to lament my own personal failings, nor to warn people that I am not the friendliest person in the world. I am writing to describe at least one of P4C's effects outside of the classroom environment. The methodology of doing philosophy with children is, in my experience, uniquely capable of developing certain personal virtues, that this development can happen in both teachers and students, and that this can be seen as one of P4C's greatest merits.

Aristotle developed an ethical philosophy based on the cultivation of *aretê*, or "virtue." According to Aristotle, human beings are capable of cultivating a great number of virtues within themselves, and these virtues — such as wisdom, temperance, courage, generosity, and so on — are the wellspring of human goodness and flourishing. For Aristotle, the primary goal of ethics is not to derive some formula or principle by which we can discover what the proper answer is to an ethical dilemma. Rather, the goal is to develop the virtues such that one becomes a person of good character, trusting that the truly virtuous person can be relied upon to correctly resolve all ethical dilemmas. My contention is that philosophy for children can be seen as engaging in a very similar project, and that it can cultivate virtues not only in students but also in their teachers. Philosophy for children is therefore potentially an aretêic endeavor, one that cultivates virtue in its participants.

I will not develop an argument in defense of this position. My experience tells me it is self-evident, and is therefore accompanied by the strength and weakness of all self-evident claims: those who accept them require no arguments, and for those who do not accept them no argument will be convincing. My aim is to show how and why P4C has been an aretêic endeavor in my own life, and to recommend its practice based on its potential for self-cultivation and self-transformation.

An initial observation many may have is that doing philosophy with children has nothing to do with the story I told about my own patience: might it not be the case that I am more patient with children in general, no matter what I happen to be doing with them, and that what I should be con-

cerned about is my lack of patience with adults? Both of the latter claims are true: I *am* generally more patient when dealing with children, and if I want to be a happier person I *should* try to figure out how to be more patient with adults. But it is not the case that I was patient with children first, and then extended my patience to the realm of P4C. Rather, I am afraid I was a generally impatient person in all aspects of life until I started doing P4C.

How does P4C itself account for the change? The “Good Thinker’s Toolkit” developed by Thomas Jackson contains part of the answer: I think the question “what do you mean by that?” is a powerful tool in developing tolerance of others’ ideas. When sitting behind the wheel of a car, I rarely think, “that was an interesting way to make a left turn” or “my, that’s quite an accomplishment, cutting off three whole lanes with a car that small.” I do not seek to interpret the other drivers’ behavior: I let the insults fly.

In order to do this, my immediate assumption must be that I know what I’m doing, and that the fool in front of me (though ordinarily I don’t use the word “fool”) clearly has no idea how to drive. In some cases this is entirely true. However, the initial assumption was essentially that the other person was in the wrong. This assumption is rejected whenever one is prepared to ask, “what do you mean by that?” It may still be that the other person is wrong. Indeed, that may even still be a lingering suspicion, but in the moment one asks, “what do you mean by that?” one is allowing for the possibility of the other’s being correct. When the “W” question is asked honestly, a fundamental shift in attitude takes place: the default position is now that the other sees things correctly, and that the questioner is the one who does not fully understand.

Similarly, the drive to seek out assumptions, examples and counterexamples — the “A,” “E” and “C” letters of the toolkit — also indicates a shift in attitude. Were I to try to think of examples in my own past behavior similar to that of the moron in front of me cutting off three lanes of traffic, I do not doubt I could find one. If I were to evaluate my assumptions about the other driver, I might realize that I have overlooked the possibility that this person is fifteen and one half years old, has never driven before, is paying more attention to the nerve-wracking screams of the parent in the passenger seat than to the surrounding traffic, and would really appreciate it if some of the other drivers on the road would cut a kid a little slack. I might realize that, were I in this poor teenager’s position, the last thing in the world that would help me drive intelligently is to hear the blaring horn of the impatient driver behind me. If I really wracked my brain, I might be able to come up with some situation that constitutes a counterexample to the thesis that this particular driving maneuver is irretrievably stupid.

But impatience threatens to render one incapable of this kind of thought. Indeed, it seems impatience is *opposed* to philosophical thinking. Identifying assumptions, examples, and counterexamples requires time, and impatience is not willing to linger. Impatience demands only superficial

analyses of situations so that it can move on. It does not scratch beneath the surface of things, while on the other hand the whole point of philosophy can be said to be scratching beneath the surface, getting under the skin to take a look at the core of what is at stake.

Now if this is the case, if philosophical thinking is diametrically opposed to the attitude of impatience, why should children enter the picture? All I have said so far is true of philosophy itself, not P4C. True, the good thinker’s toolkit is a pedagogical device of P4C, but it need not be — and indeed should not be — restricted to dialogues with children. Why was it not philosophy but philosophy *with children* that helps me cultivate the *aretê* of patience?

There are several potential answers to this question. One is that when philosophy is taught to adults, it is often presented as an antagonistic discipline. Philosophers speak of “shooting down,” “sinking,” and “defeating” arguments, of “shoring up” and “defending” their own positions. These are all militaristic terms. There are professors of analytic philosophy who speak of “the three D’s” when dealing with another philosopher’s argument in term papers: the student is to Define the terms and scope of the argument, Defend the argument in the strongest possible terms, and then Destroy it. A fundamental assumption of this approach to philosophy must be that the “opponent” is wrong, for surely we should only wish to *destroy* arguments that are incorrect. Rather than teaching patience, this approach to philosophy will actually tend to encourage impatience, for not only does it begin with the same assumption in which impatience is grounded — namely, that others are by default incorrect — but it provides one with the intellectual tools to “defeat” others in arguments (with such “victories” often being interpreted as proof of one’s own correctness).

A second reason doing philosophy with adults does not necessarily encourage patience is because certain assumptions seem to be more universally shared, assumptions which thereby escape scrutiny. When adults engage in discussions of metaphysics, for instance, they often share an initial agreement of what counts as real and unreal. The only questions, then, are *why* reality works the way it does; the *what* of reality is often left unexamined. This kind of discussion can be immeasurably deepened by such notable philosophical figures as Santa Claus. The question of whether Santa Claus is real is a legitimate problem of metaphysics *provided one is willing to respect it as such*. The trouble is that respect and intellectual openness are difficult to come by when everyone in the discussion shares the same pre-conceived answer to the question.

Children challenge many of our philosophical presuppositions, and in doing so they renew our ability to engage subjects with respect and intellectual honesty. Too often philosophical problems are of merely academic interest to adults. The question of the reality of Santa Claus is of the utmost practical importance when you are six years old, particularly when it is late December. In my own case, doing philosophy with children reminded me that I do not

know what is at stake even with such “elementary” questions as whether or not Santa Claus is real. (Did you know, for example, that Santa Claus has a magic key that can open any door or window? Having grown up in a house with a chimney, I was never aware of it; it was a first grader living in an apartment complex who taught me this.) Children reacquainted me with what intellectual honesty is really all about.

Of course there is a last feature of P4C as we do it in Hawai‘i that directly cultivates patience: the foundational principle that when doing philosophy we must not be in a rush to get somewhere. All too many teachers have lamented the fact that they are too hurried throughout the day. Their syllabi are so demanding: they must make their students meet such-and-such a standard by such-and-such a date, they have so little time and so much to teach, while at the same time additional subjects are being forced into the curriculum. Educators are trained as greyhounds are trained: to cross finish lines in a hurry. Anyone who has ever taken in a racing greyhound as a pet after its track career knows how difficult it can be to take these poor dogs for walks. It’s something like having a perpetually popping kernel of popcorn on the end of the leash; “jittery” scarcely begins to describe an ex-racing dog. Educators often feel the same nerves: there are so many finish lines to be crossed in the course of a school day.

Philosophy should be less like a race and more like a leisurely walk in the woods: if you don’t stop to enjoy the scenery, you’re missing the point. It’s not the case that the hiker doesn’t get anywhere. Eventually the end of the trail is found, but the journey itself was the destination. An educator’s training can encourage impatience because of the pressure to cross finish lines, but philosophical education demands a more relaxed approach, and therefore serves to counteract the cultivation of impatience and encourage its opposite. I know I am not the only one who thinks so. The teachers I work with have described P4C as “coming up for air” in the middle of a hectic day, and even as giving their kids a chance to “sit back and enjoy their education.” This is not to say that children cannot enjoy their other subjects, but both students and teachers recognize a certain pressure being lifted when it comes time to sit in a circle and do P4C.

My professional and academic training describe me as a philosopher and an educator. As both philosophers and educators are too often driven to develop habits that encourage impatience, perhaps it is not entirely my own fault that I find it difficult to demonstrate patience. On the other hand, perhaps it was my natural impatience that led me to both philosophy and education, fields in which my impatience might be disguised. Whatever the causes of my lack of patience may be, the techniques, practices, and overall intellectual environment of P4C have proven uniquely therapeutic.

Please do not misunderstand me: I am not claiming that doing philosophy with adults is necessarily harmful, nor

that the teaching profession inherently encourages intolerance and hasty judgment, nor that P4C will automatically make one a more patient person. On the contrary, I believe that philosophical dialogue is immeasurably important, and that many intellectual virtues can be cultivated through it. I believe that teachers demonstrate exemplary patience and understanding on a daily basis. And I believe both that cultivating patience demands a great deal of personal effort, and that P4C can encourage the cultivation of a host of virtues beyond patience. Curiosity, open-mindedness, introspection, self-respect, respect for others, intellectual honesty, and wisdom are some of the many virtues, both intellectual and moral, to be cultivated through the practice of P4C. My central claim here has been only this: like philosophy, P4C is potentially an aretêic practice, and its aretêic benefits beyond the classroom are potentially as important as anything that happens in class. In my own case P4C has been a transformative, life-altering experience, and this potential for self-transformation is as strong a recommendation for doing P4C as any of its in-class benefits.

## My First Experience With Philosophy for Children

By Laurie Tam

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**P**hilosophy for Children, also known as P4C, was first introduced to me in the school year 2001-2002 when my fellow co-workers began implementing it in their classrooms. I began to hear so much positive feedback from their sessions that I decided to try it the following year. *Philosophy for Children* is not just a way of teaching. It is a way of thinking. It makes you analyze more and gets you to see many other points of view. Cognitive development, critical thinking skills and social skills develop over the sessions.

Waikiki School is a small elementary school in the Honolulu District from grades kindergarten through sixth grade. There are primarily two classrooms per grade level with the exception of one grade that has three and one combo class. The average enrollment is about 330 students. The majority of the students are Asian.

When P4C was introduced to our faculty by Dr. Thomas E. Jackson of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, eight out of fifteen classroom teachers participated. Currently, thirteen out of fifteen teachers are using *Philosophy for Children* in their classroom.

I have to admit that using *Philosophy for Children* was not easy at first. Because it was my first year using the pro-

gram in the classroom, two people from the University of Hawaii program came to help me. I teach first grade with twenty-one students. In the beginning it does seem like total chaos. I felt as though all I was doing was behavior management and it was driving me crazy. It was hard for me to just “let the children go” in the discussions. There were times when I thought nothing happened in the discussion when something really did. The students were getting used to the format and were learning the Magic Words and Tool Kit but I could not see the purpose of why I was doing this and I could not see what the students were getting out of it. I began to doubt how this program would benefit my students. There were so many other things that needed to be covered under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. It really felt like a waste of time. But, I stuck it out and I am so grateful that I did. I started taking notes of the discussions and this is what really showed me what was happening during the discussions. When I’d get home and re-read the notes, I began to notice the depth of the discussions. Sometimes the adults in the group didn’t understand what was happening but the children did.

For example, during Christmas, we had a discussion about how Santa knows if you’ve been naughty or nice. The children began to say that maybe Santa has a magic eye. “That’s how he knows!” I had to ask what that was and it was explained by another child that it is from the Japanese cards called Yu-Gi-Oh. It’s fake eye that allows you to see things. For instance, if you are holding a card and I can’t see it, the magic eye will allow you to see what card the person is holding. “It’s cheat!” according to one student.

The benefits to using Philosophy for Children are unimaginable. Discussions are often about things that we are learning about in class. Most of the time the students vote on topics to discuss. We started the program in the second quarter of the school semester. Now we are in the fourth quarter. The discussions have become very philosophical. Disagreements and agreements go back and fourth. Children who have been passive have begun participating more frequently. Even children who have English as a second language are able to participate in discussions. Recently the children had a discussion about water and could not decide if ice came from water or water came from ice. Some of the things they said were:

It comes from cold air.

But how does it get into the sky.

If water is blue then how come the clouds are white?

How does it rain? There’s no one up in the sky holding the ice.

Why don’t we turn into ice if it’s really cold?

The topics for discussions do not always come from the

curriculum. Some of the topics that students have discussed are about Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, Easter, sea animals and water. It doesn’t matter if an answer is right or wrong. Giving students a voice in a society where they are often unheard can be very powerful.

Students learn to justify their answers by giving reasons. They learn to agree and disagree with others. They begin to see that they don’t always have to agree with other’s opinions. They make connections to things they have been learning about at home or school. Students become more inquisitive during discussions. They begin to ask more questions or make inferences. The thinking doesn’t stop at the end of the sessions. There is a carry over into other subject areas. The journal writings from the children are much more detailed. They explain and give reasons more. After our sessions, I began to have the children write about it. They often evaluate themselves in their journals.

There is no required time limit to using Philosophy for Children. However, it is critical to take into account age appropriateness. Younger children will not and should not be required to sit for long periods of time. Take your cues from the students. When they start squirming or start becoming bored with the topic it is best to stop. Some sessions may be longer than others. I have had discussions last from fifteen minutes to about an hour. Sometimes it is hard to stop them.

During our talk about water, two girls became very involved in the topic and began a conversation between just the two of them. I was amazed that the rest of the class just sat and listened. They were making very thoughtful agreements and disagreements towards each other.

I feel that Philosophy for Children has great benefits for children. I have experienced less behavior problems in class be-

cause of the sense of community. Cognitive development is currently on the top of list for educators and this is where Philosophy for Children helps. The first two objectives from Goal three of Goals 2000 state that “The academic performance of all students at the elementary and secondary level will increase significantly every quartile” and “The percentage of all students who demonstrate the ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge and write and communicate effectively will increase substantially.”<sup>1</sup> Philosophy for Children will help accomplish this goal.

I have seen the growth in the children. It is not easy at first, but my advice is to stick it out. It is exciting to hear the children for once in a world where they are hardly heard at all. The benefits to using the program overflow into other subject areas. It does work!

1 (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/EPTW/eptw10/eptw101.html>, <http://www.negp.gov/page3-7.htm>)



## Thoughts on P4C

By JoAnn Soong

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**W**hy would I continue to do P for C with so many other things put upon teachers to do in the classroom? Why would I continue to do P for C when in recent years other teachers have not continued? Is it because “the philosopher” and funny Dr. J comes and joins us? Is it because a graduate assistant comes to help in the dialogue? Is it because that’s a period I can fill in my lesson plan book?

Here are my thoughts. . .

I have engaged in Philosophy for Children for a number of years and I have seen and experienced how P for C has engaged the students and me in discussions that don’t take place any other time during the day. We can talk about our thinking and question our ideas and others within this safe environment where there is respect, trust, and learning.

We sit in a circle, a symbol that ALL is important and not just one. There is a community ball, made of pieces of yarn rolled together by each child. There are extra yarn put in to represent all others who join us. So each individual IS important in the circle and the individuals together make the community. The ball is passed around in our P for C discussions, so children are heard one at a time. Interestingly, one would think that I as the teacher would naturally get the ball whenever my hand is raised, but at times, students will pass me to engage whomever they want to. That is good because they are really engaging themselves in dialogue and they are learning from each other.

That brings me to an important thing P for C has made me do. LISTEN. There is a topic of discussion. There is a format for discussion. But I am not there to push a point or to teach a lesson. There is learning, but the learning comes from the engagement of discussion. Emphasis is not on right or wrong, but rather on the right for any individual to share their thoughts and to question other people’s thoughts in responsible ways. So we need to listen and respect what each individual has to say.

I am a participant. I also take the role of facilitator, so with P for C I take both a front and back seat approach (and

not a back seat driver approach). I could ask a question, set a way to decide on a topic, interject an idea, remind the community on the agreements of discussion, and then take a back seat to let the exchange go or let the community decide. When I think about this, maybe the students need me as a facilitator in the beginning of the year, but I can see how by the latter part of the year, students could be the facilitator themselves. What a unique opportunity for them and for me too.

We have had many different people come and join us in our P for C discussions. One thing that is interesting to me are the comments people make of the students. Not aware of the backgrounds of the students, they can just be amazed at some of the ideas and thoughts brought out by various students, even from special education students or students with a second language. For me, one of the highlights is when a shy, quiet child will, for the first time, raise his /her hand and say, “I think. . .”

With all the concern of standards and the quality of education, to me this is where students are learning to

“communicate effectively in groups and demonstrate tolerance for individual and cultural differences.”

The students get “involved in complex thinking and problem solving.” (Quotes taken from the *General Learner Outcomes of the Hawaii Content and Performance Standards*.) In discussions, one would hear “What do you mean. . .?” “I disagree with . . . because. . .” “Can you give an example?” “That’s an example.”

“That’s a counter example.” “If . . . then. . .” “You’re assuming. . . is that true?” Students learn to engage in discussions in such responsible ways as the above. How much more important for them to learn these tools for thinking while they are engaged in discussions from topics like what’s in a name, war

and peace, good and bad, and comparisons of things. Topics that are brought out in literature, math, social studies, and science can be brought to discussion. The students learn how to respond to the multitude of information and opinions they receive from their environment.

P for C goes even further in having students evaluate their own performance. Another general learner outcome calls for “the ability to recognize and produce quality performance.” At the end of the session each person in the circle responds with thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs sideways. “Was it safe?” (Did we have a safe place where each person could share their thoughts?) “How was our listening?” “Did we maintain a focus?” “How was our participation?” “Did I learn something new?” “Did we challenge



our thinking?" "Did we scratch beneath the surface?" Examples are given in our response to these questions. And if there is thumbs down, then what do we need to remember the next time?

The next time for P for C is not just the next time we meet in a circle as I see how we engage in these ways of discussion in other parts of the day. We read literature and we see *examples* of how the author engages the reader. We give *reasons* why the character said or acted that way. We do math and we wonder *if* this is so, *then* what happens here. Can we *assume* there is only one strategy to solve this mathematical problem? We learn about the histories of people and we wonder *what does that mean* for us today? There is a conflict in the playground and one asks, "Did you *assume* that? Is that *true* . . .?" So the "tools of thinking" the students learn and engage in P for C can be used throughout the day.

The power of Philosophy for Children is in providing the opportunity for the children and all those involved in that circle to engage in thinking and the sharing of that thinking in responsible ways. That comes with respecting each person and creating that safe environment where each person can feel comfortable to engage or not to engage in discussion. That engagement comes with listening to what others have to say. Then the response can include an agreement, a disagreement with reason, a verifying with example, or even silence. Then at the end of that time, the children and the other participants can take a step back and ask, "How did we do?". That reflection is important for us to learn from each other how to think and communicate better.

## P4C: A Librarian's Perspective

By Frances T.Y. Higashi

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A couple of years ago when I returned to school after maternity leave, I discovered that the library had been invaded! Strangers lead by a tall gentleman whom they referred to as "Dr J" invaded the library every Thursday at approximately 2:30p.m. They did not speak much, but went busily about their work arranging chairs in a circular formation. Then as if called by some unknown source many of the teachers from our school would slowly stroll in and take a seat in this strange formation.

The strangers, teachers and the one known as "Dr. J" had a strange ritual of passing around one of the stuffed animals that I used to decorate the library (they selected a different "chosen one" each time). I noticed that only the person who was holding was holding the "chosen one" was

allowed to speak, which was sometimes in a foreign language. As far as I could understand they said things like, "IDUS", "POPAAT", "SPLAT", and "LMO". Everyone seemed to understand this strange language and the conversation seemed to revolve around a central theme or topic, but sometimes after saying the word "LMO" the topic of conversation would often change. "Dr. J" would sometimes throw cards, with a single letter on them, on the floor and the conversation would seem to be redirected in some mysterious way.

The most amazing thing that I observed about this strange gathering was the vast array of feelings and emotions shared by the group. They sometimes cried, but many times I noticed them laughing and enjoying themselves thoroughly. They didn't always agree about things and many people shared opposing views about certain issues, but in the end they always left the room with a look of contentment. This strange behavior intrigued me and I inquired of my best friend what this whole thing was about. She told me that it was "P4C", or "Philosophy For Children." My friend Staci told me that she was using "P4C" with the students in her classroom, and that "Dr. J" and a graduate student named "Chip" were helping her. She told me that the Thursday gathering was a time for them to share their successes, "AHA's", and of course, challenges.

Now, everything started to make sense and I was excited about what the teachers, and the strangers were doing in the classroom! When it came time again to sign up to participate in "P4C", I quickly jumped at the opportunity. I don't have a regular class to conduct "P4C", but I was sure that I would be able to participate in the process in some way. I eventually adopted Staci's class, or they adopted me. We would meet every Friday in the library during our regular library time to discuss various philosophical issues. I was amazed at the insightful responses that the students often gave about different topics. Often the same students spoke, but sometimes the students who usually don't say a word, spoke up and gave responses that startled me.

My participation in "P4C" has helped me professionally and personally. I now see students in a different "light" because of what I observed in Staci's class. I discovered that children are able to think philosophically and are able to "scratch beneath the surface" to discover meaning in their thinking. Of course, in order for all these wonderful things to happen, the students must feel "safe" in their environment without fear of embarrassment, retaliation, prejudice, or misconceived judgment by their peers or the facilitators. I think the hardest part of "P4C" for the teachers, is balancing classroom management with creating this "safe" environment.

I have tried to integrate facets of "P4C" into the library environment. I have found that children's literature can be a great starting place for philosophical discussions. I feel that we are able to delve a little deeper into ideas or themes present in literature by asking philosophical questions. Also, by integrating the "P4C" lingo with our mindful

school vocabulary we are able to create a “safe” environment where students feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts and ideas.

I am still a novice with the “P4C” process, but I see great potential in the program. “P4C” has helped me learn more about the “what,” “how,” and “why” of my thinking. I discovered that thinking about thinking can be difficult at times, but if I don’t think about my thinking how can I make better decisions in the future? “P4C” has helped me uncover assumptions, inferences, and implications in my thinking that were not always “correct.” “P4C” is not about being “right” or “wrong,” but about sharing and “seeing” various points of view about something. “P4C” helped create a “safe” environment where I stretched beyond my “comfort” zone. I am truly grateful that I was given the opportunity to participate in the program this past year because I have learned so much about myself, my colleagues, and the students of Waikiki School.

## P4C and the Standards Based Curriculum

Nathaniel T. Gibbs

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Many people think philosophy is a waste of time and have little desire to support or implement a philosophy program for children. Although I believe philosophy for children can and should be practiced for its own reasons, a powerful argument can also be made that P4C supports a standards based curriculum such as the one we are obliged to teach in Hawaii.

Teaching standards is mostly about prodding children to produce certain types of work. In Hawaii, whether or not a child “meets the standard” is determined by their performance on annual standardized tests. Test questions require certain responses: some ask children to fill in one of four bubbles, others provide a small rectangular box in which a student must write the answer to a question, and usually there is one chance for a student to write an essay. The tests are long; in the fifth grade students take the tests over eight school days. Results are not available until the following school year.

There is enormous pressure for teachers to produce students who pass the tests. Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, schools whose students do not meet certain standards are subject to sanctions, including, ultimately, closure.

How does P4C help teachers and students in this situation? It is my assertion that P4C teaches students and teachers precision of language that can later be used in the standards based curriculum. For instance, every year I spend time with my class discussing criteria. This year we discussed what makes a watch. Does a sundial, if strapped to one’s wrist, constitute a watch? Does a device strapped around one’s toe, or one’s belly, constitute a watch? How about a giant wristwatch shaped clock hung on a wall? Ultimately, my students this year decided that there were two basic criteria for a watch: it must be portable, and it must be designed to tell time (though not necessarily working).

These discussions carried out over three weeks, allowed us to get at the root of what the word watch means. The discussions also familiarized students with the idea of criteria, and I was able to leverage this knowledge into their regular curriculum. For instance, criteria were especially helpful when we were studying fractions. Like most fifth graders, my class this year was puzzled by mixed numbers, which seem to be both whole numbers and parts of whole numbers at once. We clarified this issue by working through all the examples and counter-examples until we were able to set criteria for fractions. Whenever students were in doubt, then, they could check the example against the criteria and move on. The precision of our criteria enhanced my students’ thinking about fractions.

Precision of language is integral to good writing, but it is rarely found in a grade school essay. This is partly because students and teachers lack a common language to talk about non-fiction writing. A teacher may be able to say, ‘Johnny, this sentence is a run-on,’ and the student will understand the problem, but grammatical errors are easily fixed. Far more difficult is to take a student essay that is vague, and which contradicts itself, and to help the student understand why it needs to be rewritten. Often the teacher himself lacks the specificity of language to identify the problem. The Toolkit solves these problems. At the beginning of the year I teach my students my standards for a paragraph: one reason and two examples are required per paragraph. At the end of the essay I demand a paragraph that considers and dismissed counter-examples and counter reasons. Once students begin P4C, it is easy to correct errors. I can tell them, ‘this counter-example is actually an example, because it supports your thesis,’ or ‘you need a reason in this paragraph.’ Both the teacher and student know exactly what the other means.

Of course, I could use direct instruction to teach the idea of criteria, but I doubt very much if I would succeed. The genius of P4C is relevance—the examples and reasons that make up the criteria are relevant to the kids because they themselves generate them, and so they are able to easily generalize the ideas. In short, when I speak of P4C to a skeptic, I speak of its ability to enhance my standards based curriculum. Then I ask the skeptic to come watch a P4C session, and its other benefits become obvious as well.