

The High School Philosopher in Residence: What Philosophy and Philosophers Can Offer Schools

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The Call for a High School Philosopher in Residence

Ever since Thomas Jackson introduced philosophy for children to Hawai'i in the mid-1980s, one of the defining characteristics of his p4c Hawai'i program has been its commitment to working with classroom teachers in Hawai'i's public schools. Part of the program's mission has been to find every way possible to support these teachers, both in their classrooms and as faculty in a school setting. This has aided the teachers to develop their own intellectually safe communities of philosophical inquiry and to grow as colleagues engaged in philosophically fruitful reflections on issues that matter to them. All this has helped to create a deep-seated commitment among the teachers to p4c as a basic approach to teaching, rather than just another passing programmatic fad. Until relatively recently, much of the focus had been on working with teachers in elementary school classrooms, where they had the freedom to set aside time for p4c each week.

At Kailua High School (KHS)¹, two teachers—Amber Makaiau and Chad Miller—began incorporating p4c into their curricula (in social studies and English, respectively). Both have achieved impressive results in their respective classrooms. Their students have also performed well in their classes and on the high stakes tests such as the Hawai'i State Assessments, and Advanced Placement exams. More importantly, their students were engaged participants and spoke positively to other students and teachers about their English and social studies classes. Through the University of Hawai'i, Makaiau and Miller taught a course to introduce p4c to several colleagues who had become interested. Although the class was successful in introducing the theory behind philosophy for children and many aspects of the p4c pedagogy developed by Jackson, Makaiau, and Miller, it became clear that if p4c Hawai'i was going to become part of the Kailua High School culture, teachers

who wanted to implement p4c in their classrooms would need additional support.

Thus the p4c Hawai'i Executive Council decided, with the support of the Uehiro Foundation and private donors, that we would provide the support of a high school philosopher in residence as a pilot scheme. I agreed to take on this role and endeavor to translate my experience and competence with p4c in elementary school settings into the high school context. The project would enable me to learn about exactly what was required in the role of a high school philosopher in residence (PIR).

What is a High School Philosopher in Residence?

When I first began working at Kailua High School in 2007, there was no job description for a philosopher in residence. Furthermore, in creating my own job description for this position, I realized that I was working against a system that predominantly views educators as subject-matter specialists. A quite natural expectation of teachers and students is that the role of a philosopher in residence is to dispense expertise on the subject of philosophy in keeping with their standing as an authority on the historical figures, movements, schools, and arguments that are studied in philosophy departments in colleges and universities across the U.S. But I saw my role quite differently and wanted to avoid the trap of becoming just another subject specialist.

I do recognize, however, that the idea of the subject matter specialist is very deeply embedded in current educational thought and practice. The idea derives from a conception of education that sees education as the process of pouring information into learners' minds, from one sophisticated, carefully crafted container (i.e., the teacher) into several less sophisticated, still unfinished containers (i.e., the students). This emphasis on the transmission of information can be traced to the Taylor model of education

that has dominated education reform since the early 20th Century. In their book, *Becoming Good American Schools: The Struggle for Civic Virtue in Education Reform*, Jeannie Oakes et al. describe the Taylor efficiency model of education, which views teachers as factory workers and students as the widgets that they produce. The model likens knowledge and learning to commodities. Teachers, as subject-matter experts, not only ensure the continued production of this commodity, they also lobby to ensure that it is valued in proportion to how many widgets they can produce.

The Taylor model and its accompanying hierarchy of subject-matter specializations creates difficulties for teachers in engaging in interdisciplinary practices. It provides no space for collegial dialogue and collaboration. Pedagogical improvement is often limited to “tricks” for passing on new information, ideas, or concepts. In addition, teachers are too ready to profess their non-expertise in subjects outside their specialization. High school teachers will regularly proclaim, “I am not a science teacher,” or “I am not an English teacher.” This perpetuates the idea of distinct disciplines confined only to those who are recognized specialists. For those who are not recognized specialists, the discipline thus becomes external and peripheral to their interests. While the understanding of certain concepts undoubtedly requires the kind of concentrated effort that only specialists in a field can afford, the focus on content specialization creates the false impression that non-specialists or specialists in other disciplines can not meaningfully contribute to the pedagogy or understanding in a particular discipline.

Thus, when I began work at Kailua High School I understood that I had to overcome the entrenched view of philosophy as a content specialization and the view of the philosopher as subject specialist if I were to make any impact in my role as philosopher in residence. Over-emphasis on subject matter specialization makes it difficult for teachers to include philosophy as part of K–12 education. One of the reasons for the relative paucity of philosophy in K–12 education is the questionable assumption that children and adolescents are unable to comprehend the issues and questions that make up the discipline of philosophy or to engage in philosophical reasoning. A further reason is that philosophers have no recognized discipline-specific role within the K–12 school system.² I felt strongly that what was needed was to adopt a more collaborative and interdisciplinary approach.

Philosophy is generally regarded as a rather arcane subject—the preserve of specialists who predominantly teach in colleges and universities.³ Thus, in creating the position of a philosopher in residence at Kailua High School, I wanted to avoid the image of “philosopher” as a subject-matter specialist. There were several reasons for this. First, philosophy is not, and should not be, its own content area, separate from other content areas. Secondly because my role as PIR was to work with teachers in *their* classrooms, I did not want to act as the sage on the stage dispensing philosophical wisdom. My role would instead be to help teachers and students engage in philosophical activity in the classroom. The reinstatement of philosophy as a classroom activity serves as an antidote to the idea of the philosopher as a subject-matter specialist. Philosophy as an activity, specifically as a pedagogical activity, is something for all content areas. Therefore, philosophical activity also provides an opportunity for teachers to engage in a form of interdisciplinary inquiry.

I suggest that this reinstatement of philosophy as a dialogical activity in the classroom can become a useful addition to pedagogic practice and that trained philosophers can be helpful toward this end. However, this conception of philosophy is far removed from its current status and role in the academy. The idea that philosophy is more than the study of the philosophical canon and that it can be better understood as a dialogical activity is as old as philosophy itself. Indeed, it is Socrates who was the model for me as philosopher in residence. My role would be as a facilitator of philosophical dialogue and inquiry, not as a subject-matter specialist.

Philosophical dialogue and inquiry

Socrates comes to us in three Platonic versions.⁴ However, his commitment to dialogue and inquiry is a constant feature of his philosophy. Socrates often met with his interlocutors in the *stoa*, or covered walkways, in ancient Athens. His practice of meeting in a public space suggests the need for a philosophical meeting space for discussing ideas in schools. This idea of a meeting space is in direct opposition to the Taylor model of education reform. The Socratic alternative to Taylorist education reform begins with a rejection of the factory model. Teachers are not traders of information, their worth determined by the amount of information they have accumulated and generated. Rather, teachers and students meet in a community circle to

participate in philosophical dialogue. At times the dialogue may examine such well-defined territory as the workings of a cell; at other times it may explore perennially murky territory such as justice or love; or it may slide from the defined to the murky which occurs when we reach the limits of what we really understand about cell division and are faced with things we do not yet understand.

The idea of philosophy taking place at a meeting space where dialogue and collaboration are valued places the focus on the *processes* of understanding and the *purpose* of education. This focus on purpose is itself philosophical, as Socrates notes in his inquiry into the teaching of the idea of courage when he says, “And in a word, when he considers anything for the sake of another thing, he thinks on the end and not of the means” (Laches, 185d). This focus is not incompatible with testing, but in practice the discussion of the ends is often lost in the activity of the means (i.e., testing).

Finally, it is important that the philosophical dialogue about pedagogy not be coercively steered toward *the* right answer. The early Socratic dialogues often end with both Socrates and his interlocutors confused, in a state of *aporia*. Whether he is inquiring into piety, justice, virtue, or beauty, the Socrates of the early dialogues does not pretend to offer answers. At his defense he flatly states that he is not a teacher and “has never promised or imparted any teaching to anybody” (Apology, 33b). However, Socrates certainly thinks that he is engaged in a worthwhile activity; “discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do” (Apology, 38b). A constant state of *aporia* is surely not beneficial to students, and it is certainly not desirable for teachers. However, examination of oneself and others with a mind that is open to the possibility of *aporia* does help lead us to examine our lives more deeply. Allowing ourselves to admit that we do not have all the answers and, more importantly, thinking with others as we examine possible answers, is the philosophical activity that Socrates advocated and which garnered him so many admirers. This openness to wonder that is characteristic of Socratic dialogue, which is rarely practiced in public high schools, is what philosophy can help reintroduce and cultivate. Thus, I saw my role at PIT in a more Socratic sense as one who wears his or her expertise lightly—as one who seeks to learn from others

through dialogue and who is willing to enter into productive confusion with them.⁵

4. The High School Philosopher in Residence: What Philosophy and Philosophers Can Offer

Given the overemphasis on the value of information and subject-matter specialization, I have deliberately avoided trying to teach the philosophical canon to high school students and teachers. Instead, I have tried to make my value to the high school community felt not as a professor but as a co-inquirer into the practical and conceptual problems that teachers and students face. In addition, given the professional insularity that content specialization encourages, I have tried to foster an interdisciplinary community of inquiry among the teachers, where the discussion can linger on questions of the purposes and value of education rather than moving directly to devising lesson plans for content mastery. One benefit of the co-participant relationship of the PIR and teacher is that philosophy has emerged from the arcane shadows of the academy to become an activity and mindset appreciated by students and teachers. While some teachers and students develop a concurrent interest in the philosophical texts of the discipline, most acquire a confidence and appreciation of their ability to discuss philosophical subjects and examine themselves and others.

I see three main roles that a PIR can play in working with teachers and students: 1) the PIR helps keep the focus on philosophical questions of purpose and meaning; 2) the PIR helps create a community where interdepartmental discussion can flourish; and 3) the PIR collaborates with specialist teachers to think about curriculum, classroom issues, and lesson plans.⁶ The first role is to do whatever facilitates the successful performance of the other two. By discussing the question of the identification of knowledge and understanding with information and the issue of the subject matter as a specialization divorced from other subjects as philosophical problems, teachers engage their own teaching and curriculum from a more interdisciplinary perspective. In order to facilitate such discussions, the PIR must remain a philosopher, committed to the pursuit of wisdom, meaning, and understanding through dialogue. While a presentation of the full scope of these three roles is not possible in this brief article, I can offer some illustrations of what each role looks like, based upon my experiences as PIR.

School is a place of planning and action, yet as a PIR I advocate taking time to reflect and question. Recently, a high school's educational consultant organized a whole-day meeting of the English Department to come up with a list of goals that the department would work on throughout the year. The overarching goal was to create a culture of writing at the school. The teachers successfully created a list of goals and were energized by the meeting. I was fortunate to be part of that meeting because I was able to serve as co-participant in the department's activities, and I was able to identify a philosophical question that was lurking beneath the surface of the meeting. Two days later, when I met with the department after school, I prompted a discussion with the question "Why should there be a culture of writing?"⁷ After I presented several arguments against students and/or teachers being motivated by the creation of a culture of writing, the teachers had a rich philosophical discussion on the assumed intrinsic worth of writing, eventually settling on the idea that writing carries value because the individual person's beliefs and ideas carry value; to deny oneself competency in writing is to deny oneself the full potential of one's contributions to society and public discourse, at least in contemporary American society. However, the answer itself is less important than the process of teacher's grounding their commitment to a plan of action in their deeply held beliefs about individuals and education.

It is this activity of dialogue and examination that must happen across school departments. That is why I organize weekly meetings for teachers who are interested in p4c, who want to reconnect with their profession philosophically, and who want to engage in a different kind of dialogue with their peers. In a recent reflection, one teacher wrote that for her, the most valuable learning came from interaction with other teachers in the meetings, "listening to their ideas, their struggles, and their successes—that's where I found myself learning, growing, and longing to learn more." This illustrates that it is not the PIR as instructor directly transmitting the "learning," but rather a group of peers in dialogue that is most helpful in pursuing wisdom.

One of the troubling developments in philosophy becoming a discipline for academic specialists in university departments is the separation of philosopher from educator. One of Socrates' concerns was that the education of human beings had to consist of more than just training; philosophy was central to education and to living a good life. In one of

my roles as PIR, I endeavor to work with and learn from the many exemplary teachers in Hawai'i's public schools. This has included the development of lessons and units that revolve around thinking, such as lessons about inferences or problem-based learning. However, it also includes collaboration on lessons and topics with which I am far less familiar, such as modern Hawaiian history and Japanese language, where I approach the material with the fresh and inquisitive eyes of a student. In this pedagogical collaboration I serve less as a gadfly and more as a colleague. However, the focus remains on philosophical dialogue, both in the classroom and in meeting with teachers outside the classroom.

In the classroom, I have often found that students are interested in a very complex philosophical question, the depth of which may not be immediately appreciated. In one of the freshman ethnic studies classes, for example, the students were reading and discussing the novel, *The Tattoo*, by Chris McKinney. In the novel, an "auntie" is described who is fiercely protective and affectionate, but who swears at the kids continuously and yet is described as eloquent and loving. The students all wrote their questions from the chapter on the board and voted on the question they would most like to talk about (a process referred to in p4c Hawai'i as Plain Vanilla): "Can you really use the phrase fu***** little sh** as a term of endearment?" The teacher suspected that the question had received the most votes because it was about cursing and was amusing to the students (she was likely correct about several of the votes). But as the inquiry started, the complexities of the question emerged and the discussion developed into a discussion of the nature of language and the ways that meanings shift depending on context and relationships of power.⁸

My interest in the inquiry was purposefully visible, I wanted to communicate to the students and teacher that they were really digging beneath the surface. I repeatedly expressed appreciation for the students' examples and questions and occasionally provided examples or thought experiments that helped bring into focus the issues that we were struggling with. The teacher and I continued the inquiry after the class for another hour (thankfully, it had been the last class of the day), both of us grateful that the "amusing" question had gotten the most votes. On the surface, a teacher without the support of the PIR may have brushed this question off as a joke or had trouble helping the students examine their interests with intellectual rigor.

It is this type of interaction—the continuation of philosophical dialogue from inside the classroom to after school with professionals, and back again into the classroom—that characterizes the unique opportunity a PIR creates for a school community. The PIR encourages students, teachers, and administrators to move beyond content transmission and specialization and to find a shared space for inquiring into questions that are meaningful to them. While I have stepped into this role with an extensive amount of subject-matter training in academic philosophy, that training has been less relevant than the experience gained through years of experience in the classrooms of p4c veteran teachers. Looking toward the future, as more schools adopt a philosopher in residence, I do not think the position need be limited to those with graduate degrees in philosophy. Rather, anyone with an understanding of, and extensive experience with, p4c Hawai‘i and the philosopher’s pedagogy (as Miller and Makaiau have described in their article) would be able to help make philosophical dialogue and inquiry a part of the school’s culture.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kailua High School is a small public high school (2011 total enrollment = 852) located on the windward side of O‘ahu. Ethnically, the school is multicultural, with Native Hawaiians making up the largest portion of the student body (54%). Students at Kailua High School are faced with many of the same social (domestic violence, discrimination, substance abuse), economic (approximately half of the students receive free and reduced lunch), and political issues that face other students in the state of Hawai‘i.
- ² That is, unless they also become subject-matter specialists in a discipline such as English, science, history, etc.
- ³ Notable exceptions are Lipman’s P4C movement and the numerous logic and introductory philosophy courses taught in high school.
- ⁴ *In Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991) Gregory Vlastos distinguishes among three different Socratic figures in Plato’s dialogues: the Socrates of the early, middle, and later dialogues. The early Socrates represents the historical figure; the middle version is a more Platonized version who proposes a number of doctrines, such as the theory of forms, that are associated with Plato. In the later dialogues the character of Socrates retreats into the background.
- ⁵ This is less of a philosopher as a gadfly than as a co-inquirer.
- ⁶ I think there is also a fourth role that be played by PIR who are faculty in a university philosophy department: the PIR can work with teachers who are interested in continuing their own education, working with those who seek their MA or PhD, offering resources for further reading and study.
- ⁷ This is a question that I think Socrates himself would have taken great interest in.
- ⁸ Though the students were not aware of the philosophical labels of their efforts, they struggled with issues in philosophy of language, such as whether the meaning of the word is objective or dependent upon the intention of the speaker and/or the perception of the interlocutor. The socio-political dimensions of language were also explored as students tried to get a clearer understanding of whether a word could be oppressive merely because of its social history, even in cases where the intentions of the speaker were benevolent.