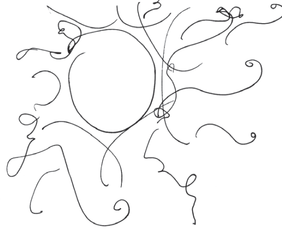
Provocations

Philosophy for Secondary School



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There are more idols in the world than there are realities.

Friedrich Nietzsche

All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols.
And that means not creating a new one –
for instance as in 'absence of an idol'.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Introduction

It is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The lessons in this book are based on talking. It's a simple yet peculiarly radical approach. Children spend little class time speaking and listening to one another, yet the best (and worst) thing about school is the opportunity to make friends and discover new people. It is this aspect which is obviously the most important to the pupils.

PE and drama are the only subjects that cannot be done solo, where the class itself is internal to the lesson, where the pupils become a group rather than a random assembly of separate individuals. Philosophy is asking to join these subjects. As well as playing and performing together, it suggests we talk together. This book is made up of questions; a question is an invitation; the best questions are the questions that multiply. In philosophy the class does not take, but rather becomes, the subject. That is to say, if these lessons have a topic, it's not so much philosophy as other people.

Listening is odd. It is porous and strange. Other people's words, like their smells, are emanations we cannot remain indifferent to. To listen is to be involved, and it's to be involved without ever quite knowing what we are involved in. Though we can suppress our own thinking, it is rather more difficult to defend against the thoughts of others, to shore ourselves up against their influence; 'shut up' is never said politely. Listening opens us up to ourselves. It permits the mind to be moved in ways we cannot will. The solipsist, in other words, is a creature of habit.

Schools harp on about respect and the necessity of boundaries without also promoting the pleasures of togetherness. The emphasis is on how it can go wrong when we are with other people, not on the

available goods. We need to respect in order not to hate. Other people are the enemies we mustn't make. But if that's all they are, what is the point of them? An education that isn't concerned with this question is an education palpably unconcerned with the good life.

The focus on listening dissolves the dichotomy of child-centred or teacher-led learning. It dissolves the idea of a source, an originator. Speaking and listening mixes and merges. Conversation makes a farce of supply and demand (a question is a demand that doesn't know what it wants, an answer is the supply that doesn't know what it is giving). To put the cards on the table, this book believes in liberalism without the individual and collectivism without the cult; the individual may not be sovereign, but neither should they be pressured to participate, which brings Oscar Wilde to mind. His line about the weather seems just as applicable to education: whenever people talk about it, one feels quite certain that they mean something else.

Education can serve as a distraction from social injustice – it is, among other things, the state's attempt to drum the family out of the child – and it is always at risk of utopianism, always in danger of converting our dissatisfaction with adults into a wish to create new ones (a wish that never works; the utopian teacher inevitably ends up more like Prospero to Caliban than Pygmalion to his statue).

Education, in other words, is plagued by its desired ends, which is perhaps why there are many more books on philosophy for primary school than there are for secondary. Children are believed to be more pliant than adolescents, they are pre-lapsarian, easier to bewitch; their eventual nature is still up for grabs. The effort to produce tolerant citizens, rational individuals or sceptical atheists is a race against time.

The adolescent is a lost cause; they are a kind of underclass. Though we can imagine a situation in which a child might protest that they should be treated more like a child, or an adult like an adult, it is rather more difficult to imagine an adolescent asking to be treated like an adoles-

cent. Whatever it is about adolescents that makes adults envy them, it is not the trust and understanding they receive (these are, of course, things which the adolescent seeks to sabotage; it might be worth acknowledging that adolescents present us with impossibilities, such as the need to maintain our understanding while not forestalling their resourceful attempts to shatter it).

If we dropped that other dichotomy, the one of knowledge or skills, and approached education with an old-fashioned belief in virtue – our dispositional paths to self-actualising pleasure – we might think of the project as being to encourage, or bring out, the virtues of the pupil. When teaching children we would encourage their childhood virtues and when teaching adolescents we would seek out and inspire their adolescent virtues.

What, then, are the virtues of adolescence? Unless we are interested in this question, I would suggest, provocatively rather than prescriptively, we should not be teaching. The idea is simply that we cannot live well unless we are living as ourselves.

Of course, for us to see these adolescent dispositions as virtues we must be free to consider them as options, and aspirations, for ourselves.

Set-Up

The classroom should be arranged in whatever way will be conducive to conversation. These are three options: horseshoe, circle and desks.

Having pupils seated in a horseshoe creates the sense of a shared space where everyone can see everyone. The opening also gives you access to the board. But if you don't wish to use the board, sitting in a closed circle is often better.

The horseshoe has a leak in it. I have taught classes where their sessions were much improved simply because we sealed the leak and sat in a circle. Sitting with the class in a circle offers a greater sense of your presence. It is no good asking pupils to speak if you are not going to help them feel they are being listened to. The board can be an unhelpful distraction, even a barrier. The allure is that its filled emptiness at the end of a session will prove that something has been achieved, something has been produced. But the board will only give the teacher's version of what has been achieved or produced, and this risks becoming the party line.

If teaching philosophy were to have its sins, pre-emption and foreclosure – forms of interruption – would be cardinal. Philosophy is incorrigibly curious. To teach philosophy you need to adapt to the idea that you might not be able to identify what, if anything, was achieved. When we read a poem or eat an eclair we don't sit and wonder afterwards what we've accomplished. Profit is not the point (no philosopher ever went into it for the money). Philosophy requires you to lead with passivity.

The circle and horseshoe may not do. A class may find it too difficult to sit in a shared space. What feels communal to some will feel exposed to others. I have found that some classes are more able to enter into a session when they remain at their desks. Every class is different. There is no single way. When arranging the classroom, the question is simply: what will best enable discussion?

Find yourself a large (easy to catch), soft (obviously), colourful (exuberance is beauty) ball. This will be passed round the group, held by the speaker. The ball is like the baton in a relay. It connects speakers, it hints at a common thread. It also serves as a signal to help follow the action. And it gives the pupils a sense of security; when holding the ball they know they will have the space and time to think and talk without being interrupted or overridden. Again, some classes get along fine

without a ball, and this becomes truer the smaller the class is. But, beside the point, the ball also makes the time more enjoyable. It knocks things over and hits people in the head. Pupils become rather attached to it.

If you do use the board, you should emphasise to the class that in philosophy it undergoes a metamorphosis. It's no longer an instrument of information but a medium of experimentation. I have found that if pupils are not aware of this change, they become outraged when an idea they disagree with is converted into pixels; it is seen as a kind of sanctification. In philosophy what's written on the board is not what the class is being taught, but what they are being asked to consider; the board is not performing its usual function. This also applies to the teacher's voice.

You are not using your voice to direct or dictate. When you speak in philosophy you are not telling but suggesting. So you need to suspend your certainties. The voice becomes a catalyst, a solvent. It may take the class a while to get used to this. Their voices are also being used differently. They are not reciting or speaking to please. They are speaking to find out what they believe. Speech is not a medium of consensus or conformity, of falling into line, nor is it a declaration of individuality. It's something else.

Material

The sessions feature three types of questions: *Starter Questions*, *Hermeneutic Questions* and *Task Questions*. Starter Questions are the prelude, they get things started; Hermeneutic Questions are the digestion, they give the class time to ponder a text; and Task Questions are the eye of the storm, the central philosophical focus. That's the idea. But, in fact, you may find that a Task Question falls flat and that a

Starter or Hermeneutic Question carries more energy. Don't let the book's way of carving things up distract you. Don't feel you must reach the Task Questions, or spend more time on them. The sessions are made up of several different sections and you should also feel free to skip sections or reverse their order. The book is written to be customised rather than followed.

Each session is potentially enormous. They have not been written to fit into an hour, though they have been written to fill at least an hour. One of my classes spent three hours on a Starter Question (What is nature?). We took nearly half a term on a single session. Do not feel that you must fit it all in. Somewhat absurdly, you must be prepared to change direction and improvise. Lesson plans are only for the omniscient.

The various questions mostly have bullet-pointed questions beneath them. These constitute a map of the possible terrain, a suggestion of where the discussion may go or where you might like to take it. They are there as an additional resource. You may find that one is more interesting than its corresponding Task Question, in which case you should nudge the Task Question aside. In the discussion new and interesting questions will often emerge. If, say, you're discussing torture and a pupil asks, 'Does prison count as torture?', you might feel it'd be good to shift course and give this question to the class as their main focus. You will find yourself discussing things you hadn't anticipated. You cannot step into the same session twice.

Most of the Task Questions are closed questions, meaning they can be answered with a straight yes or no. The best reason for this is that closed questions are more inclusive. All that a closed question is asking of the pupil is whether they accept or reject something, whether they swallow or spit; it is appealing to taste rather than reason. As such, it is easier to become involved in the discussion. When a pupil has given their yes/no answer, you would then ask them why they think that, but

to take a first step into the discussion they don't need to be Rodin's *Thinker*. Thinking is not an entry requirement. Once in, then you can encourage their thinking via the questions you ask.

To give the questions a different spin, you can turn them into assertions. An assertion isn't asking us what we think, it's telling us what to think, and so it can work better at provoking a response. It gives the pupils something to resist or it articulates something they believe. Rather than asking, 'Is it more pleasurable to be bad than good?', you would say, 'It is more pleasurable to be bad than good.' Rather than asking, 'Are people basically selfish?', you would say, 'Everyone is selfish.' Then you would ask, 'Does anyone believe this?'

A further option is to ask no questions at all. You may simply want to present the story, or whatever it is, ask the class if anyone has any thoughts about it, then let the discussion loose. Alternatively, once you've got the hang of philosophy, you might discard the book and present nothing.

I sometimes go in with no prepared material and begin by asking the class what they have been thinking about during the past week. Sessions that open like this tend to be more free-flowing. You might start with a thought about fortune telling and end with a discussion on make-up. A free-flowing session isn't necessarily better, it's just another option. But before you feel comfortable turning miscellaneous thoughts into evocative questions and shaping a discussion from thin air, using prepared sessions is good practice.

Every session in the book has an epigraph. I included these for my own pleasure but they can be fruitful. Writing one up on the board at the outset, you can say, for example, 'This is a line from an ancient Persian writer called Rumi. I've written it up because the questions we discuss may connect to this quote, and maybe by talking about these questions, we will get an idea of what the quote means.' Then, at opportune moments in the discussion, you can return to it: 'Does what you're

saying have any connection to the Rumi quote?' or 'Does anyone now think they understand the quote?' Of course, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. There is little design to the choice of quotes, which can make them an interesting addition to a session.

A final point about age appropriateness. Some of the sessions are quite graphic or touch on disturbing topics. I haven't recommended any lower age limits because every class is different and you are in a better position to decide what is and is not appropriate for your class. But, of course, the best way to establish their maturity is to test it – just let the class know that if anyone is finding a discussion too much, you will, without hesitation, move the lesson on to a different topic.

Discussion

The pupils need to feel free to speak. Explain to them that in philosophy no one is more intelligent than anyone else. There is no one whose thoughts are worth any more than your own. There is no one to lower our heads to, no voices that can cancel yours out. (To this end it's worth emphasising that you should not evaluate or appraise answers; before moving on to the next pupil, you can simply end with a thank you.)

Philosophy occupies a tantalising position – otherwise known as democracy – between or beyond the poles of expert knowledge and personal opinion (the task being to claim rather than explain the world). The philosopher is neither a scientist nor a shopper. It seems to me that from primary to secondary, the space beyond authoritative judgement and personal opinion starts to disappear – or rather, the ideas of authoritative judgement and personal opinion start to emerge and encircle – and requires relearning. Primary school children are less self-conscious of their ideas.

Philosophy is against self-consciousness; it is for absorption and intrigue. It won't allow us to be the centre of attention or just another face in the crowd. The meagre and the special are no good at conversation. (However, what may appear to be self-conscious inhibition could actually be a promiscuously adolescent wish to keep one's options open.)

When you first pose a question, give the class a couple of minutes to discuss it with the people round them. It would be silly to snap your fingers and expect immediate answers to the world's mysteries. Talk time gives the class the space in which their ideas can emerge. It also serves as a relief from the group discussion. Philosophy requires patience, but the risk is that a pupil will wait so long that they lose their desire to speak. Talk time gives everyone the opportunity to use their voice. As such it can also revitalise a discussion. If you notice the energy starting to flag, but you feel the present question has more to offer, you can recycle the question with another talk time.

Another important feature of talk time is that it gives you the opportunity to involve quieter pupils. By directly listening and talking to these pupils during talk time, you can then encourage them to share their ideas in the group discussion. You can reassure them that what they've said is interesting and would be a brilliant contribution. It may be that some pupils really do not want to speak and no one should feel pressured to participate. If you throw someone the ball in order to prompt a contribution, ensure you've emphasised to the class that they are free to decline. Having said that, it is, of course, very difficult to tell whether someone is resisting their desire to speak or if they'd actually rather not, so it's important to be encouraging without being forceful and to be *laissez-faire* without being negligent.

Do not rush pupils. If they lose their train of thought or fall into confused silence, give them a minute to think it through. Simply repeating the question is often helpful, but you do need to be patient and allow

for silence. A philosophy session is neither a game show nor a Quaker meeting, but it's closer to a Quaker meeting. When the pupil with the ball is sitting in silence trying to figure out what they want to say, others can grow impatient and frustrated, but you need to be patient on their behalf. The concern with keeping pupils 'engaged' risks becoming a fear of their frustration. And philosophy is frustrating, just like everything else. Though we probably shouldn't intend to frustrate or bore our classes, nor should we be preoccupied with not doing so (who are we trying to convince?).

As I've said, philosophy is conversational. When pupils start philosophy they don't tend to naturally fall into a dialogue. They will give you their answer to the question but they won't connect it to other answers, as if they were all doing philosophy separately, together. So a large part of what you'll be doing is trying to engender the conversation. This can be done by asking questions like, 'Is what you're saying similar to X's idea?', 'Oh right, so would you say your thoughts are quite different to X's?', 'And what did you think about X's idea? Do you think that too?', 'Okay, let's all focus on X's question. What do we think about it?' and so on. The wish is for the class to listen to each other, to see their thoughts as part of a context, a conversation.

It can take a few weeks, it can take longer, but eventually you'll stop needing to ask these questions so often. The class will start responding to each other far more; they will start to do your job for you. It is therefore possible to be too strict about letting only the person with the ball speak. You want the class to be able to respond to each other spontaneously. You don't want them to feel that they can't address the speaker – with a question, objection or something else – without first putting up their hands. Rules are a means to an end. The best moments are when you can step back and let the conversation happen. If the conversation stops happening, if people are talking over each other and not letting others finish, then, of course, it's time to intervene. Not interrupting others is important; it's a matter of not cramping their style.

Provocations is a set of philosophy sessions designed for secondary school and predicated on the pedagogical methods of The Philosophy Foundation. These sessions are mature and challenging, exploring, among other things: Wagner and desire, Shakespeare and madness, Joan of Arc and gender, Faust and temptation, and Nostradamus and time. They span the curriculum and provide an opportunity for teachers across a range of subjects to introduce a philosophical approach to their lessons. There are practical tips and suggestions throughout about how to use the book in the classroom.

'This book is a superb provocation to philosophy itself … It should be in every schoolroom, and every teacher's hands, as an instrument that will transform students' interest and capacity across the whole range of not just their studies but their lives.'

From the foreword by A. C. Grayling

'Beautifully written, clearly presented, and drawing from a wide and rich range of original sources, this is a superb resource for secondary school teachers keen to encourage independent, bold and creative thinking from their students (and perhaps give their own critical faculties a tickle while they're at it …).'

Helen Mulley, Editor, *Teach Secondary*

'This is an excellent resource – inspiring, clear and well-organised. Anyone thinking of introducing philosophy into the classroom should own a copy.'

Stephen Law, Heythrop College, University of London

'In the best tradition of the Socratic gadfly, David Birch challenges many current practices and assumptions in education, and provides an imaginative resource for stimulating debate, critical reflection and creative thinking on a wide and engaging range of topics. His emphasis on the importance of listening as well as speaking, for the teacher as well as the student, is refreshing.'

Dr Angie Hobbs, Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy, University of Sheffield

David Birch works for The Philosophy Foundation, an award-winning charity that brings philosophy to schools and the wider community. He is also a teacher of philosophy and religious studies at both Newham Sixth Form College and Kensington Park School.

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