

# Philosophy in the Schools Project

## CONGRESS 2008 – University of British Columbia

### Minutes

June 5, 2008

Chair: Karen Zoppa, University of Winnipeg Collegiate

#### Outline

- Introductions
  - Karen Zoppa
  - Frank Cunningham, University of Toronto
  - Bruce Hunter, University of Alberta
- Topics to be covered
  - Overview of Philosophy as a “teachable subject” in Ontario (Cunningham)
  - Pre-university Philosophy courses in Alberta (Hunter)
  - Manitoba Experiences
- Discussion of Topical Questions presented by Chair, Karen Zoppa

#### Details

- Introductions:
  - Karen Zoppa: high school teacher at the University of Winnipeg Collegiate
  - Frank Cunningham: former dean of Innis College, University of Toronto; Ontario Philosophy Teachers’ Association (OPTA) member; Professor, Philosophy and Political Science departments, University of Toronto
  - Bruce Hunter: Chair of Philosophy department, University of Alberta; sitting in for Rob Wilson, who has been responsible for the development of a Philosophy for Children program at the University of Alberta
- Topics Covered:
  - Philosophy as a “teachable subject” in Ontario: Frank Cunningham
    - The process began with the development of a high school philosophy course for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. The course was created for students in Grade 13 (i.e., Ontario Academic Credit (OAC)). Since that time, OAC has been eliminated from Ontario public schools; as a result, the high school Philosophy course morphed into two courses: one

called “The Big Questions” for Grade 11 students and one called “Philosophy: Theories and Questions” for Grade 12 students.

- Ontario Philosophy Teachers’ Association (OPTA) was created with the mandate to assist high school philosophy teachers across the province who teach one of these two courses. They host an annual conference in Toronto (May). The demand for the course is high: there are approximately 35,000 students enrolled in these courses in Ontario.
  - Until recently (2008), undergraduates wishing to teach high school Philosophy courses needed to acquire course credits in two other “teachable” areas (e.g., history, geography, English, etc.). The result: B.Ed. programs were not teaching future high school Philosophy teachers how to teach Philosophy.
  - Dr. Cunningham met with 12 chairs of Ontario university Philosophy departments to inform and work with teacher education programs to improve the delivery of high school Philosophy courses.
- Dr. Hunter discussed the status of pre-university Philosophy in Albert. It is not a teachable subject in Alberta, but some high schools offer International Baccalaureate (IB) courses (i.e., Theory of Knowledge). Edmonton decentralized their public school systems. The University of Alberta has gone directly to the schools to suggest programs in pre-university Philosophy.
- UofA faculty member, Rob Wilson, has experience with Western Australia’s Philosophy programs for children. He has taken courses with the International Association for Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University (USA).
  - There are currently three or four graduate students in UofA’s Philosophy department with an interest and experience in teaching pre-university Philosophy.
  - Philosophy for Children is different than Ontario’s high school Philosophy course because it is aimed at children between Grades 4 and 9 (middle or junior high school age).
  - UofA’s program uses novels and teaching manuals written by Mathew Lipman (e.g., Pixie) and others.
  - The UofA’s program is working on setting up a centre with teacher training sessions. Rob Wilson has acquired a SSHRCC grant for this. Currently PhD students and faculty members run training sessions and at-school training to facilitate teachers’ use of the manuals.
  - Method: Philosophy integrated into the existing curricula (especially Language Arts and Social Studies).
  - Future possibility: work with faculty of education to introduce a course (Philosophy for Children could be open to all OR an

Introductory Philosophy course set in a community learning course aimed at Philosophy for Children).

- Manitoba Experiences: Karen Zoppa discussed the process by which the Deputy Minister of Curriculum was approached to (a) support the development of a course pack for high school Philosophy and (b) pilot the program. The aim was to build a grass roots program with public sessions (after school) at which a university Philosopher would speak. These public lectures were successfully attended. There is a challenge that the Philosophy in the Schools (PITS) Manitoba group feels needs to be addressed: teachers feel that school administrators see a Philosophy course as conflicting with IB courses.
  - Dr. Cunningham responded: the Ontario Grade 12 course is offered as a choice; that is, teachers can choose any three of the seven possible areas (e.g., Logic; Epistemology; Ethics; etc.) to cover throughout the course.
- Discussion on Questions presented by Karen Zoppa
  - Bruce Hunter (BH): option of Philosophy as a teachable: it is in the works for 6-8 year old students.
  - Karen Zoppa (KZ): Alberta Ministry of Education credit course in Philosophy
  - BH: Catholic schools may have course available.
  - Frank Cunningham (FC): Catholic teachers in Ontario were enthusiastic about the courses (FC has given three lectures in Catholic schools)
  - BH: Christian schools may have similar “values education” course
  - KZ: Burning Question: Could you give your rationale for Philosophy in the Schools? And provide a context for your rationale?
  - FC: dialogue and debate over years about course development, what kind of courses they should be, etc. Opted for “basic” Philosophy (i.e., History of Philosophy) with a focus on problems in Philosophy. Students want to engage in debate. Alternate: courses that focused on either values education or critical thinking; these would have been accepted into system earlier, but we wanted to stick to format (outlined above). The rationale: high school students should not be excluded from what high school students in the rest of the world experience (i.e., liberal arts education).
  - BH: [passed around the teacher manual for Lipman’s *Pixie*]
  - FC: should/could push “transferrable skills” model: studies show that students who are good at Philosophy can use these skills in other fields (e.g., essay writing – logical structure of language (see, for example, *Pixie* and Lipman’s *Teacher’s Manual for Pixie*)
  - Question from audience: according to developmental psychology, have children reached cognitive reasoning capability (i.e., formal operation)? If not, why teach this? How can this be measured as an outcome?

- Question from audience (Daniel Vokey, Faculty of Education, UBC): Whose Philosophy?
- Response: FC: we had to discuss this and pay attention to different countries' logical scholars
- Response: BH: Lipman novels need to be changed because they are American
- KZ: What do you think about teaching Philosophy without teaching Philosophers?
- FC: we want to teach Philosophers and ideas
- KZ: Courses go through a vetting process because they are locally developed. As long as you frame the discussion of old dead white guys with reference to their issues.
- Question from audience: Teaching Philosophy in Canada is outdated? Can you speak to that?
- KZ: Question: What about the content of Philosophy education (e.g., B.Ed.) course?
- FC: problem = Philosophy students in high school will want and should be given basic university Philosophy courses. Important: university Philosophers need to work closely with the schools. Additional Qualification (AQ) courses are being developed for in-service teachers for September 2010; one model for these courses would be to have a university Philosophy professor partnered with a Faculty of Education instructor. The bigger problem, however, is with Universities: having a lot of trouble teaching current undergraduate course (de-emphasis on undergraduate).
- KZ: Goal of PITS: network with faculty liaisons in university Philosophy departments and pair with teachers of philosophy.
- Audience (Will Buchert, University of Saskatchewan): Saskatchewan has an interest in developing a Philosophy in the Schools in Saskatoon.
- KZ: Why do we see this current move?
- FC: 1. Good in itself. 2. Philosophy was under attack (as it was in antiquity) as a discipline. After the introduction of high school Philosophy courses, enrollment in university-level Philosophy courses went up; it also turned off some students early (i.e., before university level courses). 3. Subvert/corrupt minds of the youth = motivate = create critical thinking citizens (as a thinking person possessed with critical thinking skills); course received a lot of support from parents
- BH: Two questions: 1. Why would we be interested in this? 2. Why would anyone else want us to do this? The Ministry of Education's focus is on values education: critical values education without being controversial (one side or other).
- Question: Are other Philosophy courses being developed for Ontario's schools (e.g., courses for students in grades 8-10)?
- FC: Yes, but we are busy with 11 & 12 courses.
- Question: Are private schools offering course? Could Grade 8-10 not be a place to pilot courses?

- FC: Yes. Catholic schools and private schools. Andrew Wilson of the University of Toronto Schools (private high school) is a teacher of Philosophy. He has created the Aristotle project (in conjunction with UofT's Philosophy dept and OPTA), which is an essay writing contest.
- Question: What about students who come to university-level Philosophy courses with previous experience (i.e., from high school Philosophy courses)?
- FC: Address this by making 1<sup>st</sup> year Philosophy courses not prerequisites for 2<sup>nd</sup> + years. High school students don't need to do first year Philosophy course. At this point, we cannot be certain that they acquired the basic skills in their high school Philosophy course, but now that it is a "teachable" we can be fairly certain in 8-10 years that the students entering first-year university Philosophy courses will have the acquired the basics.