

Taking the time to talk about issues that matter: A dialogic approach to teaching Society & Environment

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An extensive body of research from within both cognitive psychology and the Philosophy for Children programme consistently demonstrates that engaging students of all ages in class discussions of real-world issues results in a raft of positive educational and social outcomes. Benefits include the development of critical reasoning skills, increases in scores of English comprehension, vocabulary and mathematical understandings, improvements in social skills and a decrease in behaviour management problems. Moreover, when students are given the opportunity to engage in ongoing discussions with their peers about real-world social and environmental issues that matter – significant issues such as climate change, children’s rights and poverty - the effects can be profound. Indeed, dedicating time for discussion of such issues within Society & Environment programmes has been shown to foster students’ interest in and deep understanding of social and environmental issues and to support the development of ethical reasoning skills and dispositions. Drawing on a series of real-life vignettes from Society & Environment classrooms, this paper describes the processes involved in effectively facilitating whole class discussions of significant social and environmental issues. The paper also highlights the rich rewards to be had by students and teachers, and by society as a whole, when we take the time to talk about issues that matter in Society & Environment.

Introduction

Picture, if you will, a group of around twenty very young (Reception/Year 1) students sitting cross-legged on the floor, their teacher (and me, a visiting researcher) included in their circle. We have just finished reading a picture book, 'Zoo' by Anthony Browne (1992), and the children have each raised at least one question from the story – something that puzzles them, a picture perhaps that they are curious to explore further. One child wants to know why the dad in the story tells mean jokes all the time, someone else wants to work out why traffic jams happen having recently been stuck in one. Others want to know why some animals in the story look sad, why the elephant is standing in the corner, why the tiger is pacing up and down, why the penguins have their own proper swimming pool, and so on. The teacher records all these questions, sorting them into similar themes as she goes, making sure that the questioner's name is recorded alongside his or her question. Our task in the following Society & Environment lessons is to work together to try and find answers to these questions that mattered to the children.

Just as we are about to select a question to get us started with our first class discussion, an African boy not long arrived in Australia, excitedly calls out another question: "Why are the giraffes living in a brick building? At home they run past our garden, they don't live in buildings, so they shouldn't be there!" And so began our discussion. The children were entranced to think that giraffes might run past one's garden, wanting to know more about this very different and distant life experienced by other people and animals. Some students wanted to defend keeping the giraffes in a "building" explaining that zoos must keep wild animals in cages to protect people and other animals and even to prevent the caged animals themselves from being hurt. "But why do we even have to have zoos?" someone else asked only to be informed or reminded by another student that zoos help care for animals that are endangered. A different student then suggested that zoos are good because they allow us all a chance to see and hear and smell wild animals, like tigers, up close. We returned to the picture of the tiger, which in Anthony Browne's words was '...walking along a wall of the cage, then turning round and walking all of the way back'. The students were asked to think about why it might be pacing in such a way: because it's angry; because it doesn't have anything else to do; because it's bored, they suggested. Some students seemed worried by these reasons, declaring that it isn't fair to keep a tiger behind bars if it is bored, angry or unhappy being caged. Referring back to a point made earlier, another child reiterated that it even if the tiger *is* bored, we should still be

allowed the chance to see one for ourselves, and that it might even make us care more about them if we see how huge and scary they are. Then, quite out of the blue, a usually very quiet student proclaimed that “The tiger in the zoo isn’t really a wild tiger any more because it can’t do the things that real tigers like to do.” This was something of a revelation for us all. Eventually, in response, someone asked whether that means it’s wrong to keep tigers in cages, a question we broadened by asking whether it is ever ok to keep a wild animal in a cage. And so for a number of weeks, alongside learning about the basic needs of animals during science lessons and the role of zoos during environmental studies, we thought and talked together in an effort to find answers to this and our other questions. In the end most of the students seemed to think that there are definitely times when it is fine, proper even, to keep wild animals in cages, but that it is always best if the animals’ basic needs (and therefore basic rights) are met as closely as possible. Others in the class finished the unit feeling convinced that it can never be right to keep wild animals in cages. Their arguments (on both sides) were passionate, well justified and compelling and I for one was left sitting uncomfortably on the fence. I need to have another go at talking through the issue in the classroom, especially now that the pandas have arrived in Adelaide and I feel compelled to go and see them but also troubled by the thought of doing so!

Such is the power of classroom dialogue to help us get to the heart of real-world social and environmental issues. But I need now to elaborate on the kind of dialogue that fosters such curiosity and thoughtfulness in even very young students and that has the potential to deepen our own understanding of the topics we teach.

Dialogic Teaching

There is a rapidly growing body of literature into what is becoming known in education circles as ‘dialogic teaching’. In her recent paper reviewing this research, Sue Lyle (following Mikhail Bakhtin) contrasts dialogic and monologic talk (and teaching) in the following way:

A monologic teacher is largely concerned with the transmission of knowledge to pupils and remains firmly in control of the goals of talk. Monologic discourse is an instrumental approach to communication geared towards achieving the teacher’s goals. In contrast, dialogic talk is concerned to promote communication through authentic exchanges. There is genuine concern for the views of the talk partners and effort is made to help participants share and build meaning collaboratively...Monologic talk focuses power on the teacher; it stifles dialogue and interactions between pupils and their ideas. Dialogic talk creates a space for multiple voices and discourses that challenge the asymmetrical power relations constructed by monologic practices. (Lyle, 2008, p. 225)

Lyle (2008) also reminds us that observational research dating back to the 1970s consistently demonstrates that while classrooms are full of talk, very little of that talk is used to promote student interaction (in the way that class members interacted during the discussion of zoos in my earlier example). Indeed, a large-scale study into classroom practice tells us that on the whole:

Teachers' questions [tended]...to be low level, designed to funnel children's responses towards a required answer and that children provided answers which were three words or fewer for 70% of the time, with children's exchange lasting an average of five seconds (Lyle, 2008, p. 226)

While disappointing, such findings are not all that surprising; existing educational practices and structures, including for example, time pressures, the crowded curriculum and an emphasis on basic skills, are always difficult to overcome and effective facilitation of whole class discussions depends, in part at least, on teachers receiving appropriate and sufficient training in this challenging classroom approach. Still, such obstacles are there to be overcome and it is surely worth making an effort to do so when we consider the many evidence-based (and exciting) outcomes that genuine classroom dialogue can bring to the learning and lives of our students.

Very briefly, research from the last four decades has demonstrated that engaging students (across the year levels) in whole class discussions about issues that matter to them is effective in: developing logical and ethical reasoning skills and dispositions; improving a diverse range of social skills; increasing mathematics, English comprehension and vocabulary scores; fostering empathy; and reducing behavioural problems in classrooms and schools (Lyle, 2008; Gracia-Moriyon, Rebollo & Colom (2005); Trickey & Topping (2004); Collins, 2005). Much of this research relates to a particular dialogic teaching approach developed in the 1970s by philosopher and educator, Matthew Lipman (often referred to as the "father" of Philosophy for Children). Drawing on the Socratic method of questioning, Lipman and his colleagues established a dialogic approach to the teaching of philosophy known as the 'community of inquiry' (Lipman, 2003; Splitter & Sharp, 1995). While initially developed as a forum for discussing philosophical issues, a community of inquiry approach can be used to bring genuine classroom dialogue to all curriculum areas (Knight & Collins, in press).

The community of inquiry

Typically, the approach takes the form of whole class discussions, lasting anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour or more depending on the age of the students. The teacher's role in this approach is that of questioner, facilitator and, importantly, co-inquirer. The students and teacher sit

together in a circle or semi-circle so that everyone can see and hear everyone else with ease and in comfort. Discussion topics are generated by the students in response to carefully selected stimulus materials which may include picture books, excerpts from novels, news reports, poems, song lyrics, or perhaps photographs, a painting or film footage. The students' questions and key ideas raised during the discussion are recorded and displayed throughout the duration of the topic.

Participants in a community of inquiry work collaboratively to make progress in answering questions of individual and social significance and in so doing:

...learn to cooperate with one another by building onto one another's ideas, by questioning each other's underlying assumptions, by suggesting alternatives when some among them find themselves blocked and frustrated, and by listening carefully and respectfully to the ways in which other people express how things appear to them (Lipman, 1985, p.37).

This emphasis on *respectful* collaboration is crucial. The classroom community of inquiry needs to be a forum in which participants will:

...respect and value each other's contributions, even where these contributions run counter to their own. This does not mean simply accepting the opposing view; nor does it mean adopting the attitude that all views are equally acceptable, equally likely to be true. It means instead focussing on the *reasons* participants advance for their views and a commitment to assessing these reasons for truth and relevance (Collins, 2005, p. 86).

In a community of inquiry that is working well, participants will have the courage to risk an opinion in the knowledge that they can do so safely. Sometimes though, in such a forum, the views put forward can be unexpectedly passionate and candid. Some can even be blatantly ignorant or prejudiced. Yet, allowing such views to be aired is a vital first step if we are serious about trying to overcome prejudice and injustice through social education. Another real-life classroom example will help to illustrate this point.

I had the pleasure some years ago to work with an amazing group of upper primary students and their equally amazing teacher. The school was in a very socially disadvantaged area north of Adelaide and the students' lives were complicated and difficult.

In the previous week's community of inquiry session we had been discussing the notion of fairness in relation to the distribution of teacher time; trying to work out whether a teacher should spend more time with students who are struggling to understand (say) a new concept in maths. That discussion

had twisted and turned as students considered the reasons why a teacher might decide to do so seemingly at the expense of students who had grasped the concept easily and were waiting to move on to the next topic. By the end of the session, the students had (impressively) discovered and articulated several competing notions of distributive justice and, on the whole, were in favour of a 'needs-based' version in which those who required the most help (for various reasons) should receive in order to bring them up to a base-line level of achievement. While summarising this discussion in preparation for considering questions of social justice beyond the classroom, a student raised a question that had obviously troubled her for some time: 'Why', she asked, 'do the Aboriginal kids at this school get their own lunch-time club but we don't?' This prompted nods and murmurs of agreement and a second question from a different student: 'And they get into the swimming pool for free...is *that* fair...why should *they* get special treatment?' Not surprisingly, this question stimulated an even livelier ripple of response among the group. Clearly, the questions mattered to the students and just as clearly, they needed to be unpacked and explored and answers to them found. This was no easy task.

We began by recording the questions and thinking about how we should go about answering them. 'First', someone suggested in relation to the swimming pool example, 'we have to find out if it's true that Aboriginal kids get in free', a question answered easily by a visit to the school office where it was confirmed that Aboriginal students received free entry to the pool for school-based swimming lessons under a government funded support scheme. With that information in hand we turned to the more difficult question of why it might be that such funding schemes, and lunch-time clubs, exist for some only. Here, one of the two Aboriginal Australian students in the class confidently pointed to the very high rate of school absence among Aboriginal students and explained that the government wants to help these students enjoy school more and fit in better so that they will want to stay and get an education. The free entry to the pool, she suggested, might be because their families couldn't afford swimming lessons. 'Well, lots of our families can't really afford things like that, so why shouldn't we get in for free as well?' asked someone else, evoking the following heartfelt and very frank response from yet another student: 'Aboriginal people get everything they want from the government, so they don't even try to get a job or look after themselves. They're lazy and most of them are drunk all they time anyway'. With a great deal of trepidation these three claims were written on the board and in the following sessions we worked together to evaluate them in terms of truth and relevance. The planned Society & Environment topic was abandoned for a time and instead a unit on contemporary indigenous issues was taught. Alongside this unit, the students were engaged in discussions about the nature of stereotyping and discrimination and the significant harm

caused by prejudice at both societal and individual levels. More specifically, in our effort to foster students' understanding about this highly controversial issue, students were encouraged and supported during discussions to seek and evaluate evidence, to take circumstances into account, to consider how it might feel to be subjected to racist attitudes and actions, and to weigh the harm and good for all concerned that might arise from equal opportunity support schemes.

While I do not have statistical evidence to show that our effort here was effective in terms of reducing students' levels of prejudice toward Aboriginal Australians, it is worth noting there are studies demonstrating the effectiveness of dialogue in reducing prejudice (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). I do feel confident however, to say that the students were able and willing to think calmly and critically and ethically about the issues we discussed. Attitudes and anxieties about special treatment programmes appeared to soften and, in many cases, change as the discussions progressed and the students became very concerned to avoid falling into the trap of stereotyping or relying on unfounded claims about Aboriginal Australians.

The point I really want to highlight through this example, though, is that the community of inquiry provided a forum in which such racist views could be voiced and taken up rather than being suppressed or censored as is so often the case when sensitive or controversial topics are raised in the public domain. As disconcerting as it is to actually hear such views being aired, we know that they are widely and deeply entrenched within in our society and as such, they need to be challenged. And, just as importantly, in a community of inquiry, views and opinions are never left hanging but instead are always subject to careful and sustained scrutiny and evaluation as participants work together to apply the procedures of critical and ethical reasoning in a quest to find answers to their questions.

I would like to finish by noting another aspect of community of inquiry discussions rarely referred to in the literature, but a feature I find rewarding in both a professional and personal sense. In my experience, genuine classroom dialogue, whether with five year olds or adults or any age group in between, allows me to get to know my students very well and also allows my students to get to know me well. And, it enables the students to get to know each other better, regardless of whether or not they are friends. Through whole class discussions we can come to understand and appreciate that, regardless of our academic or physical strengths and weaknesses, we can all contribute to the community of inquiry by sharing and justifying our thoughts. We can come to appreciate the quiet thoughtfulness of those who rarely voice their views, and become more tolerant of others who always have much to say when we notice them trying to hold back to let someone else into the

conversation. Through the reasons, examples and anecdotes offered by individuals during discussions we are given a chance to really come to understand each other's likes and dislikes, interests and passions, political and religious leanings, cultural and social backgrounds, the things we care most about, and so on. And the impact of coming to better know our peers can have a profound effect on individuals and the community of inquiry as a whole, as illustrated in my final and much briefer example from the classroom.

This time the setting is a recent university tutorial made up of some twenty students soon to become qualified junior primary/primary teachers. In the early weeks of their Society & Environment curriculum course we focussed on environmental issues including climate change and the water shortage in South Australia. Two students in particular contributed passionately, knowledgeably and very frequently to our discussions, explaining key ecological concepts as they arose and often referring to the significant, though quite different, changes they had each made in their own lives in an effort to live more sustainably. For most others in the class, the topic was apparently (and rather worryingly) relatively new and they expressed very little interest in discussing it. Moreover, this latter group of students quickly became defensive, feeling they were being hounded by their 'green' peers to change their daily ways for the good of the planet. The dynamics in the group began to change with the environmentally pro-active students less inclined to contribute to discussions, while those newer to the topic struggled to get their heads around the complex content. As their knowledge-base grew however, and they began to explore their own ecological footprints, the group dynamics shifted once again as they started to ask questions of their more environmentally conscious and committed peers who patiently, and more gently than before, began to contribute once again to the class discussions. Indeed, they never looked back and it was very satisfying to observe this particular community of inquiry flourish in the coming weeks as participants worked together to think through a raft of real-world social issues.

Conclusion

One final comment: it must be acknowledged that talking with students about significant social and environmental issues (in the way I have described the process in this paper) is a very challenging way of teaching. It involves relinquishing some of the power and control we are used to having in the classroom; it means we do not always know where discussions will take us; it requires us to prepare extensively but also to think on our feet for much of the time; it demands that we engage in professional development to learn and refine the skills of effective facilitation; it calls for ongoing scholarly reading and thinking about the topics we want to discuss with our students. Still, it is

possible to teach in this way, even within the constraints of current educational structures, and I hope I have shown that the rewards for doing so are rich and plentiful for students and teachers and for society; that it is well worth the effort it takes to talk with our students about issues that matter.

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