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Abstract:

This paper is centered on analyzing how a 'philosophy for children' lecturing methodology (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1978) can foster learning amongst foundation-level students at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, MCAST. This is a college that offers VET (vocational education and training) in different areas to students aged 16 and over. Foundation level courses are at level 1 of the National Vocational Qualifications framework, this level being the most basic. The students in this study are reading Health and Social Care. The courses on offer at MCAST in Health and Social Care go up to level 6, the level of an undergraduate degree level qualification. It is possible for students to progress from level 1 to level 6 over seven years of study. Alternatively, they may terminate their studies with a lower level of qualification, including after completing the Foundation level course. The methodology that has been adopted is based on engaging these students in continual questioning and philosophical reflection on the subject matter and on their connecting it with learning derived from other sources and from their personal life-experiences. It is based on engaging them in asking their own questions, exploring concepts that they deem as important, learning from each other's points of view, and thereby understanding themselves and others from a more reflexive perspective. It is both lecturer-centered and student-centered since lecturers model appropriate procedures of inquiry, encouraging students to find a voice so as to challenge what they deem as unacceptable, rather than intervening so as to impose pre-empted conclusions. The analysis is based on an ethnographic approach that is informed by the students' voices and that involves field observation and focus-groups. It is anticipated that this study will provide an understanding of the student's own assessment of the benefits of stimulating their philosophical curiosity through the medium of applying a philosophy for children methodology to Health and Social Care studies amongst college students.

Key-words: Identity; critical pedagogy; changed beliefs; questioning; self-reflection

Filosofía para Niños. Apreciando su impacto en estudiantes de nivel superior

Resumen:

Este trabajo se centra en analizar cómo una metodología de enseñanza de “filosofía para niños” (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1978) puede alimentar la enseñanza en el nivel de fundamentos, entre estudiantes de la Universidad de Malta de Artes, Ciencia y Tecnología (MCAST). Esta Universidad ofrece VET (Educación y Formación Vocacional) a estudiantes con edad a partir de 16 años. Los cursos de fundamentos están en el nivel 1 del Cuadro Nacional de Calificaciones Vocacionales, siendo el nivel más básico. Los estudiantes de este estudio están estudiando Salud y Cuidado Social. Los cursos que se ofrecen en MCAST en Salud y Cuidado Social van hasta el nivel 6, nivel correspondiente a una formación de grado. Los estudiantes pueden hacer ese trayecto, del nivel 1 al 6, en 7 años. Alternativamente, pueden terminar sus estudios en un nivel más bajo, incluso después de terminar el curso de nivel de fundamento. La metodología que ha sido adoptada está basada en comprometer a los estudiantes en un continuo cuestionamiento y en la reflexión filosófica sobre la materia estudiada y en conectarla con aprendizajes derivados de otras fuentes y de sus experiencias de vida personales. Está basada en comprometerlos a que se formulen sus propias preguntas, explorando conceptos que ellos consideran importantes, aprendiendo del punto de vista de cada uno y, por lo tanto, entendiéndose a sí mismos y a los otros desde una perspectiva más reflexiva. Está centrada tanto en la exposición del profesor cuanto en el alumno, en tanto las exposiciones modelan procedimientos de investigación apropiados, animando a los estudiantes a encontrar una voz que les permita desafiar lo que consideran inaceptable, más que intervenir para imponer conclusiones predeterminadas. El análisis se basa en una aproximación etnográfica que adquiere su forma por las voces de los estudiantes y que implica observación de campo y grupos focales. Se anticipa que este estudio va a proveer una comprensión de la propia evaluación del estudiante de los beneficios de estimular su curiosidad filosófica por medio de la aplicación de una metodología de filosofía para niños a los Estudios de Salud y Cuidado Social entre estudiantes universitarios.

Palabras clave: Identidad; pedagogía crítica; creencias cambiadas; cuestionamiento; auto-reflexividad

Filosofia para crianças. Avaliando seu impacto em estudantes de nível superior

Este trabalho destina-se a analisar como uma metodologia de ensino de “filosofia para crianças” (Lipman, Sharp e Oscanyan, 1978) pode fomentar o ensino em nível de fundamentos, entre estudantes da Universidad de Malta de Artes, Ciência e Tecnologia (MCAST). Esta Universidade oferece o VET (Educação e Formação Profissional) a estudantes com idade a partir de 16 anos. Os cursos de fundamentos estão no nível 1 do Quadro Nacional de Qualificações Profissionais, sendo este o nível mais básico. Os estudantes desse estudo estão estudando Saúde e Cuidado Social. Os cursos oferecidos no MCAST em Saúde e Cuidado Social vão até o nível 6, nível correspondente à formação de nível superior. Os estudantes podem fazer este percurso, do nível 1 ao nível 6, em 7 anos. Alternativamente, podem terminar seus estudos em um nível mais baixo, inclusive depois de terminar o curso de nível fundamental. A metodologia que tem sido adotada está calcada em engajar os alunos em um contínuo questionamento, também na reflexão filosófica sobre a matéria estudada e em conectá-la com aprendizagem de outras áreas e suas experiências pessoais. A metodologia está baseada no comprometimento dos alunos na formulação de perguntas próprias, explorando os conceitos que eles consideram importantes, aprendendo desde o ponto de vista de cada um. Assim, eles entendem a si mesmos e aos outros desde uma perspectiva mais reflexiva. Está centrada tanto na exposição do professor quanto no aluno, na medida em que as exposições modelam os procedimentos apropriados de investigação, estimulando os estudantes a encontrarem uma voz que permita-os a desafiar o que consideravam inaceitável, mais do que intervir para impor conclusões pré-determinadas. A análise se baseia em uma aproximação etnográfica que toma sua forma pelas vozes dos estudantes e que envolve observação de campo e grupos focais. Antecipa-se que este estudo vai promover uma compreensão da própria avaliação dos estudantes acerca dos benefícios de estimular suas curiosidades filosóficas por meio da utilização de uma metodologia de filosofia para crianças nos cursos de Saúde e Cuidado Social entre os estudantes universitários.

Palavras-chave: Identidade; pedagogia crítica; crenças mudadas; questionamento; auto-reflexão

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN. APPRAISING ITS IMPACT ON COLLEGE LEVEL STUDENTS

Damian Spiteri

Introduction

Malta is located in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea with Libya to the south and Sicily and Italy to the north. It is part of an archipelago of seven islands, the Maltese Islands, of which only three are inhabited. The total area of these islands is around three hundred squared kilometers. The population is roughly slightly less than around half a million people. English is widely spoken in Malta, Malta being the largest island of the archipelago.

In Malta, at post-secondary educational level, students can choose between pursuing their general education leading on to university admission, if they desire, or can take a vocational route by studying at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). This paper is focused on students who have taken the latter route. They are all in the 16 to 17 year old age bracket. They are reading for a foundation-level course in Health and Social Care. (The foundation-level diploma is the equivalent of a level 1 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training course). They have been exposed to a Philosophy for Children (P4C) methodology for the first time by the author in a course of 'lectures' that he was assigned to give on the topic of people's changing needs across their life-span.

This article reviews their experience of this methodology and their sensitivity to whether they engaged themselves in such characteristic processes as reflection, argumentation, exploration, clarification, and dialogue. The paper offers a narrative account of the manner in which they saw themselves exposing "the ethical dilemmas, aesthetic qualities, political tensions and other philosophical dimensions" (Laverty and Gregory, 2007, p. 281) associated with discussing people's needs as the principal task they were set. This is consistent with Lipman's (1988, 1991) approach that classrooms can be converted to classroom communities where students could be enabled to think philosophically through such means as

discussing alternatives, exposing inconsistencies in arguments, and exploring for themselves the feasibility of giving reasons for beliefs.

The approach used is one that is participant-centered and gives a voice to the students' own appraisal of their own ideas and questions. Coming from both an education and social-work background, I had an interest in exploring stories that are based on people's accounts of their own life-experiences. Based on this, I have chosen a narrative approach to exploring how young people experienced their being introduced to P4C in the manner described in the introduction above. This approach makes explicit the subjective manner in which they perceive and conduct themselves particularly in relation to clients (who they encounter, most especially, while on their placements) or the wider community (Randall, 2002).

I have also adopted Silverman's (2001, p. 230) recommendation to researchers to present "the data in the participants' own words". This data has been presented together with the questions that provoked the answers and narratives, whenever this was feasible. I believe that Silverman's suggestion allows the overall context in which such assertions are made to be better understood. For added purposes of clarity and consistency, I have applied my own further development of such approaches as those used in qualitative research by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in the manner in which I approached the drafting up of this article. This involved 'collapsing' the students' ideas together into key-words or themes that appeared to capture the essential meaning of what the students were saying. These were those of 'active thought' and the 'rationale for asking questions'. Then I re-collapsed these themes into a central theme namely that of 'deriving different ways of knowing.' Here, I am referring to philosophically-inclined questioning about people's needs across the life-span serving as a means for promoting further knowledge.

Sub-theme 1: "I have learnt to think about things differently".

It is a known fact that no teaching can take place without there being active thought exercised by students in the classroom or lecture-room. This rests on the assumption that interest is not only generated through the acquisition of knowledge but by the meaning that is given to that knowledge. Stated otherwise, learning can be said to take place when otherwise dry data comes alive. One way in which data comes alive is when people's perspectives of a given reality change in such a way that they can more readily identify with the data presented.

This is precisely what happened when discussing people's needs across the life-course. One of the students Malcolm said, "I think that by asking questions in the manner we are doing, we are becoming different people. I would never have even dreamed of asking the questions I am asking now a week ago." The notion of reasonable thinking that is both 'caring and critical' is not new to P4C practitioners and has been referred to extensively by writers such as Lipman (1991). Stating this, what is novel to Malcolm is his realization that the 'knowing and doing' aspects of learning can be associated with the 'being' aspect of personhood. By noting that he was a different person since he was asking questions that he would not have asked previously, inherently, he is claiming that his expanded repertoire of thoughts has stimulated his own personal growth manifested by his wider awareness of a given reality. Splitter (2007) notes that processes of intrapersonal change such as this are associated with people's constructing and reconstructing an 'emergent sense of identity' (p. 263).

The classroom discussions, centered as they were on exploring people's needs over the life-course allowed the students' self-concept and their understanding of their self-concept to be brought under scrutiny. This was shown particularly when, during one discussion, they spoke about an elderly person. At a point in time there was a marked shift in the dialogue that the students were generating together. No longer was the discussion focused on 'a person' (i.e. the

elderly person concerned) but rather on 'what would I do if I was this elderly person in this given set of circumstances?'

By means of the questions they were putting to one another, the students related the information they had on this person to their own life-experiences. In this respect, they engaged themselves with a core aspect of P4C, namely that of infusing stories with subjective meaningfulness. They thereby developed a philosophically-inclined awareness without losing track of their own search for truths and knowledge by building on and exploring new concepts such as what it would be like if they were to be in this elderly person's shoes. Rather than simply empathizing, however, the students were challenging themselves to develop understanding that was based on questioning, reasoning, creative thinking, and judgment.

While it cannot be excluded that certain answers may appear to be more appropriate than others, or reflect certain theoretical positions more accurately, as a lecturer/educator, I was not as much focused on finding the right answers (or deciding on which are the wrong ones) as I was on engaging the students in exploring what it was that made them believe that the answers they were giving were the right (or wrong) ones. This meta-awareness resulted from them making their own beliefs known to one another, discussing them, and sometimes challenging them accordingly.

[Martha]: "I think that all elderly people become 'dependent' at some point. That is why as carers we will always have a 'job'."

[John]: "What do you mean by 'dependent'?"

[Martha]: "It means you cannot attend to activities of daily living without there being someone else present to assist you - that is unless you want to die of fright."

[John]: “Does this mean that if you are dependent and there is nobody around, you would feel very frightened? Is there a way of being dependent and not being fearful? The two concepts are not one of the same thing.”

A different aspect of such challenging came about when the students discussed how they thought issues could be resolved, or how they thought that they should be resolved, and needed the time in which to do so. As a lecturer, I believed that all the students needed to have access to an equitable amount of time in which to say what they had in mind. For this reason, I had to check that none of the students dominated the group. Consequently, I also became a time-keeper. However, as the group evolved, this role became increasingly redundant. This was because the students took it into their hands to challenge any attitude or behavior that they perceived as unacceptable within the overall context of the group. This manifested the increased self-confidence and self-reliance that the students experienced as a result of their participation and personal involvement in the ongoing discussions.

I also made personally sure that I looked at any solutions that were suggested as proposed ‘solutions’ or ‘possible solutions.’ This was so as not to make the cardinal error of closing off discussion by my own attitudes. This enabled the students (as in the above exchange between John and Martha) to express their own thoughts, opinions and feelings authentically. Within a P4C context, Simenc (2008, p. 327) notes that the:

key strength of (such) authenticity is its ability to motivate students. Without the dimension of authentic investigation, which also makes the position of the students authentic, students in class would just be observers [or narrators] rather than participants.

This authenticity, alongside the students’ desire to think about things differently, has come about through different aspects of the critical pedagogy that has been adopted in the lecture-room setting. For instance, the clearly defined role

of the lecturer, interventions that were suited to a democratically run lecture, the emphasis on knowledge and meaning, and the development and inculcating of a questioning attitude (which are all associated with critical pedagogy) can all be viewed as conducive to promoting active inquiry. Such active inquiry is based on a link between active thought and the questioning that both provokes and underlies this type of thought. Active inquiry can be approached through a decision to ask questions. This is explored below.

Sub-theme 2: Why ask questions in the first place?

It was evident from the outset of this analysis that the participants saw the questions more than the answers as promoting learning. Since, in many instances, they had asked questions that have no answers, they were emphasizing what Sharp and Splitter (1995, p. 58) refer to as “open substantive” questions, including questions that probe reasons and evidence, such as “why should I believe that? Nobody knows enough about this person to make such a statement and present it as a fact.” This type of discussion led to an opening of ideas by stimulating the students to ask further questions and thereby to engage in deeper philosophical investigation of the subject being spoken about. This is being said as it led to further questions that were centered on concepts such as goodness, identity, love, friendship, responsibility, language, fairness, reason, existence, possibility, beauty, meaning, self, time, infinity, human nature, and thought. Through asking questions of this nature, the students showed the centrality of philosophy to educational processes that are based on engaging them in active thinking.

On further exploring what they saw as the importance of questions, two students pointed out that being open to new ideas and being ready to accept them is an intrinsic part of such a questioning attitude. They also stated that sometimes this meant being ready to contest messages learnt at home where, as children, they were asked not to ask questions about certain things or not to speak about certain

things. This was in an effort that they would not 'rock the boat' and thereby possibly disturb the existing family homeostasis.

[Moderator]: "In the discussion that we had, at one point, I was under the impression that there appeared to be a consensus amongst ourselves that some things were better left unsaid. Would anyone like to elaborate on that?"

[Donna]: "There are things you would not ask so as not to appear impolite. Take the old woman's smoking habit. There are things that you would not ask since you carry your own personal baggage from home. If you are used to your father smoking at table after meals, and, if you tried to stop him from smoking, got shouted at by your father, told to shut up by your mother, and see your brother light up a cigarette as well, not only will you not tell your father not to smoke, you will probably want to smoke a fag yourself. You will unconsciously carry these pressures with you and simply not ask the person why she smokes and if she is conscious about the harm it causes, most especially now that she is elderly."

[Eloise]: "There are two issues at stake here. Firstly, there are your values about smoking, that smoking is wrong but has to be tolerated because of your past experiences, and also the old lady's values, that she chooses to smoke, come what may. In both cases, you seem to be presenting all-or-nothing beliefs, and this implies that while you appear to have a commitment to challenging this person's behavior, your fear is about your underlying beliefs about that behavior. Yet, what is important is your awareness about where this is coming from. Your awareness allows you to weaken your commitment to staying silent by being open-minded about staying silent and thereby to challenge your silence as you are doing here and now."

Eloise's challenging Donna in this way also shows that she is making an effort to correct her (Donna's) thinking in so far as she thinks as this is constituted of 'all-or-nothing' beliefs. This particular type of confronting shows that the

students felt comfortable to challenge one another openly. This is an essential characteristic of a community of inquiry. It can be differentiated from teaching approaches that are based on the lecturer's intervening to 'correct' the students in some way since these would lack the same auto-critical quality.

As people's beliefs change due to this type of challenging, false beliefs are dropped and new beliefs are adopted. Naturally, for this to be possible, inquirers need to be open-minded enough to allow contrary inputs, discoveries, observation and knowledge to allow this self-correcting mechanism in groups to become both nascent and operative. This is because, when people consider opposed views, this usually challenges them to deepen their understanding of these divergent views in order to reassert (or refute) their original premisses(es) in the light of the fresh data with which they are now confronted (Mill, 1978). This is consistent with P4C's aim of instilling a questioning disposition in every individual, which, when internalized, can then become one of "the reflective habits of the individual" (Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, 1980, p. 45), alongside other practices such as in-depth observation and accurate empathy. The relevance of a questioning disposition to a widening of people's perspectives emerges clearly from the following narrative.

[Moderator]: "Malcolm had pointed out that some things may go deeper than they appear at face-value. He said that he thinks that the elderly lady is not simply distrustful of her relatives because they do not go to see her. Malcolm thinks that the old lady believes that her relatives have done something to hurt her. I would like you to explore if you agree with what Malcolm is thinking in terms of whether you consider it as a correct assumption to make."

[Elizabeth]: "There is this saying that when I assume that means that I make an ass out of you and me. Nobody knows what is in this person's mind and by asking what is in her mind is pointless since your guess is as good as mine."

However, it can be true that she is responding in the way she is to her relatives since she has recollections of unpleasantness.”

[Janine]: “On the other hand, if we look at the whole picture, we have a person who is suffering from dementia, and who would not remember me if I speak to her some time later. Surely we need to step back a little bit, and see if she has really argued with her relatives, and essentially see if we are all barking up the wrong tree in trying to examine what has gone wrong between them.”

The initial questions are being challenged for their relevance and validity in the light of the fresh data about the person’s suffering with dementia. Janine is stepping back into an observer position to consider and explain what she considers to be an important dimension of the old lady’s story. This skill of stepping back and considering different perspectives can be seen as something that provides a valuable lesson about improved self-reflexivity and self-awareness.

I would like to propose that meta-communication in the above extract appears to be on two levels. I am calling these ‘meta-conversation’ and ‘meta-discussion’. ‘Meta-conversation’ is the more spontaneous of the two. It can be likened to when two people meet one another and start talking without putting much conscious effort into reflecting about what they are saying. In the context of the illustration above, Malcolm’s interpretation that the old lady’s mistrust stems from her having been hurt in the past can be said to be on the meta-conversation level. ‘Meta-discussion’ would come about when another view (or views) is created that challenges this original belief, (in this case, as stated by Malcolm), and that serves to generate a tension between the original belief and any other beliefs that come to be generated. On this level of thinking, the success of the ‘meta-discussion’ could only exist if the person who is engaging in the ‘meta-conversation’ (in this case, Malcolm) would be open enough to consider the validity of other view-points. This is even more so, if these other view points may refute or weaken the original belief proposed. This implies that if the students

refuse to consider the person's dementia, it is clear that certain elements of thought and reflection would be omitted from the discussion about the elderly lady.

In other words, 'meta-discussion' is based upon a dialogical inquiry that is centered upon the sharing of ideas and the challenging of restricted view-points. This challenging is what then causes the ongoing dialogue to lead to another view-point being promoted. Naturally, any arising assertions or 'conclusions' can also be challenged and contested further, and, in turn, this can lead on to further view-points coming to be expressed and challenged.

When asking the participants whether they thought that they had learnt something as a result of the questioning approach that they had adopted, the participants emphasized that it helped them to come up with multiple view-points to a subject rather than simply ingesting the material that was presented in a text-book. They claimed that originally they feared that they did not know enough about the subject of human needs to engage in this type of discussion, but as time went by, they overcame this inertia as they started seeing that there was little data, information and knowledge that could not be questioned in some way. Their ability to integrate themselves with what is discussed allowed them to become "self-correcting and self-organizing" (Kennedy, 2004, p. 216). This does not imply that the students did not have to engage in appropriate readings and to know certain facts, but, rather, that these could be shared in a group-setting, as indicated below.

[Elaine]: "As we were saying, there are certain things that are true, such as the possibility of elderly persons looking back at their past, and regretting the decisions they took, and the life they led. The old man that we interviewed regretted having spent all his life in administrative tasks and not having had the opportunity to do more adventurous things."

[Mark]: "Once I read a book about the difference between ideas of truth and ideas of meaning. There might be people we know who regret that their life was

not different – if so that is a truth. However, in this group, we are discussing something which is beyond a truth, we are discussing that many truths can co-exist at the same time. In this man’s life, there are certain things he regrets, yet there are others that he does not. Think of all the needs he has talked about and his satisfaction and happiness at meeting those needs. These include his relationship with his children, a stable job, two houses, friends, and his ability to enjoy himself with others throughout his life. What seems to be his major regret was his having made his job so central in his life and, as a result, excluding other things from it.”

[Janice]: “The aim of the group, of the questions that we made to one another, was to understand at a deeper level what a person’s needs are. We know, on one level, that during childhood, a person has needs for attachment, bonding and detachment; we know that during adolescence a person has needs for socialization, particularly from peers; we know that during early adulthood, a person has needs for a more intimate companionship that is usually defined differently from when one is an adolescent. We know all these things. They are in the books. However, I think that this group has not only been dedicated to our knowledge of these things; it has, in fact, gone beyond that. It has caused us to question not whether we know these things but whether we understand them and how we understand them. For instance, can all of us here see a person’s needs from many different perspectives rather than simply that of the ones presented in the book? The aim of our discussion was not to ask the right questions, but to ask questions that lead us to creating our own better understanding of a particular person’s life-situations.”

[Etienne]: “I would say that it was about doing away with stereotypes, all adolescents are this, or all adolescents need this... and, I would also say, doing away with prejudice.”

[Ritienne]: “I would say that we go full circle back to some things that are written in the books. It is about discovering and rediscovering truths – and making those truths our own if they make sense to us. I agree with Mark that there are

ideas of truth and ideas of meaning, but discussions such as the ones we are having can help us find out deeper truth that we fully understand and make our own.”

The participants are taking an evolving and non-relativist stance with respect to truth. It is non-relativist since they are not asserting that the person’s life experience needs to be seen in comparison to those of other people, nor are they juxtaposing his life-needs with those of other people, or engaging in some form of ‘compare and contrast’ exercise with what is written in their text-book. Rather, the discussion has been focused on understanding the one person, about seeing the one person’s needs “from many different perspectives,” as Janice said. The group is also conscious that their data about the elderly person is informed by data that they have about other elderly people. This can be seen by Elaine’s assertion that it is true that many elderly people can look back at their past and regret different aspects of it. This is an important aspect of proposing a truth, for, as Gardner (1986, p. 110) points out “even though it may be true that all crows are black, one ought to have little confidence in espousing that claim if one has only seen one black crow”.

Stating this, this non-relativist position has assisted them to sway away from arriving at some absolutistic concept, since the group is certain that they are unable to say everything about this old person and his needs and that the reflection is one that is forever on-going. There is thereby need for a “searching kind of thought” (Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, 1980, p. 202) which allows them to see the scope of their exploration as one that is based on aiming at an idea that can always be further built upon and evolved. This is because there is no end to the thinking process. Stated otherwise, the group may aim for intermittent ideas that are seen as obtainable, provided that these do not obstruct the promotion of further ideas that allow further elaboration on the nature of what is being discussed to take place. Gardner (1986) notes that “the characteristic that

differentiates philosophical thinking from merely “clever,” “skilled,” or what might be labeled by some as “critical thinking” is that a person who thinks philosophically is passionate about discovering truth rather than merely being passionate about seeming to be espousing truth” (p. 102). This is consistent with Lipman’s (1991) assertion that the goal of philosophy for children is for participants to think for themselves.

This thinking for oneself has been described by one of the participants (Jacques) as having “one’s own beliefs about something that are built upon or changed through questioning and reflection”. As Sharp and Splitter (1995, p. 169) point out, this makes such beliefs the “raw ingredients” of the inquiry. It is as a result of these ingredients that such an inquiry can come to exist. The self-expression that occurs in such an inquiry brings about a greater state of self-awareness which then translates into the participants experiencing a greater sense of harmony within themselves as they increase control over their own thinking by reinforcing clarifying thoughts and by disputing such cognitive distortions as generalizations and ‘black-and-white thinking.’ This theme was summed up by Jacques in a further question that he asked during the focus-group, namely ‘now that we have done these lessons about these elderly people what have we learnt about ourselves?’

This accentuation on self-awareness needs to translate into other-centeredness amongst students of Health and Social Care. This is because, within the context of all human beings, “unless we are open to the other, empathize with them, and are responsive to their reasons, we will not be ... transformed by ... [interpersonal] experience[s]” (Bleazby, 2006, p. 43). This was illustrated by Aaron who mentioned a particular incident where an elderly person was taken to a care-home by her relatives and was literally thrown in the home and left alone with a suitcase crying and weeping.

[Moderator]: “When we recall Aaron mentioning that there was an elderly person who was left at the home, we all expressed feelings of frustration. I would like to explore with you why this was so”.

[Aaron]: “Well, when I said that, I was thinking that this brings about another question, when to believe what. It is not ok for these people to do what they did in the way they did it, that is not open to discussion. There is no issue there. One just has to feel frustrated”.

[Martha]: “There could have actually been another issue at stake. It might be the case that these people simply could not look after the old lady, and in reality, they did not want either themselves or the old lady to suffer. However, as care workers, by feeling frustrated in such circumstances, are we helping either the old lady or ourselves?”

[Rebecca]: “What is certain is that as care-workers, we have a value about being non-judgmental and accepting. I would like to go back to what we said during our lectures some time back. This does not mean that we have to approve of everything that goes on, but we need to be accepting of the fact that there are things in life that we cannot change. Stating this, there is no reason why our perception of those things cannot change. Nor is there any reason why we cannot reconstruct the experience in a different way, as we had done in the lectures on cognitive psychology”.

[Aaron]: “But how can you reconstruct such an experience, an old lady sobbing her heart out, and, in your heart of hearts, knowing that there is nothing that can be done about her situation. For her, the old folk’s home is a waiting-room for death.”

[Martha]: “Let’s start from there. Can anyone see this home as being something other than a waiting-room for death? How about seeing it as a place where she can be given the best care possible, granted her particular circumstances in her old age?”

[Aaron]: “Physically, she will be cared for. However, what about how she feels and about the quality of life she has, I mean, mentally, psychologically, and socially?”

[Martha]: What are we all studying for? Aaron, you can make caring for others, so to speak, through the job of a carer, your life-mission, just as I can, and just as everyone here can. That is something that is up to us, not up to life’s circumstances.”

The questions that have been asked do not so much address the plight of the old person, neither are they directed at making the students more engrossed in her world. Rather, the students whilst remaining conscious of the suffering of this person are seeking to understand each others’ frames of reference so as to create their own facilitative strategies for supporting one another when encountering an elderly person who is going through the experience described. They are conscious of the old lady’s suffering, yet they are clear that they are training to be care-workers and that their role is that of a care-worker and not that of an elderly person in a residential setting.

Core theme: “Different ways of knowing.”

The participants in this study saw their questioning as centered upon a context where they could raise and explore such themes as knowledge and belief, right and wrong, fairness and unfairness, and causality. The subject matter being taught allowed them to exercise a certain degree of self-determination that was conducive to the constructivist approach adopted. Students had considerable leeway in choosing what they wanted to discuss and also what they wanted to leave out of the discussion. Even if, as their lecturer, I was restricted in what I could introduce for discussion in class (due to my having to adhere to a prescribed syllabus), the manner in which the curriculum was laid down and in which

learning objectives and learning outcomes were set, provided me with an element of choice in how test and assignment questions could be set. In practice, what happened was that the students developed, together with me, suitable illustrations of questions that could lead to discussions about people's needs. The ensuing discussions led to their not only knowing about needs but more importantly to their thinking about those needs and raising relevant questions about them. At times, the questions led on to other questions implying that the students had arrived at a point of substantive closure. Very often, they made summaries of points they had raised or of questions they had asked without assuming or believing that their inquiry into a particular question or topic had been concluded.

As a result of the collaborative approach that is associated with the adoption of such an approach to teaching and learning, the participants also developed such aspects of pro-social interpersonal conduct as good listening skills, responsiveness to what other students were saying, a willingness to try to support their own ideas with good reasons, and an openness to the possibility that they should modify their beliefs in light of any arising new considerations. This was achieved since they participated together in such a way as to make their ideas explicit and construct knowledge together. Any arising points of argument, investigation, criticism and other modes of challenging and confronting could easily promote students' acquisition of a "greater acumen in the methods of inquiry, including critical and creative thinking in the subject and the dialogical skills of social mediation and collaboration" (Laverty and Gregory, 2007, p. 283) as a result of the synergy created. Through their discussions, and dialogue the students have presented P4C as a medium through which they allowed themselves to infuse their learning with a more subjective meaningfulness than had that data had to be handed to them through traditional 'chalk and talk' methods. Such methods would not have provoked philosophical dialogue since they would have been too lecturer-centered to allow this to happen. Somewhat far removed from this, as a result of the adoption of a P4C approach, the students were enabled to look into

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such things as whether beliefs are accurately expressed, whether they are coherent, and, also, to question the contexts in which they are applicable. It also enabled them to question and re-question different aspects of reality in a philosophically inclined manner, namely, one that is characteristic of a community of inquiry.

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