

Philosophy in Secondary Schools: An Integrative Model

In recent years, there have been a number of efforts to introduce philosophy at the pre-college level. Dr. Thomas Wartenberg has written curricula designed to introduce primary school aged students to philosophical questioning. Similarly, the American Philosophical Association's Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy has established PLATO, an online resource for teaching philosophy at both the primary and secondary levels, and Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth has offered philosophy courses ranging from logic to existentialism to middle and high school aged students. In a recent UNESCO report, Johannes Rohbeck claims, "in a world where teaching is becoming increasingly technically oriented, philosophy is often the first victim, compared with the arts and history," and suggests that "Because the aim of teaching philosophy is to develop critical judgement and the rational analysis of human experience, it can offer valid intellectual tools, additional to and complementing technical and scientific subjects" (Rohbeck 2011, 40).

One model for bringing philosophy into high school curricula is to offer electives, and one does find more and more high schools doing so. Yet, many schools may find this difficult to do, for budget reasons, lack of qualified instructors, lack of time to offer additional electives, or other reasons. Another model, that could either work together with introductory electives or on its own, would involve integrating philosophy across the curriculum of a high school, by bringing it directly into each of the traditional five core subjects (English, history, language, science, and mathematics). One place where this latter approach has been used successfully is at Gymnase français de Bienne in Switzerland (Rohbeck citing Mireille Lévy, Daniel Bourquin, and Pierre Paroz 2011, 52). The teachers at this school report, "A relationship based on dialogue and reciprocity can be established between philosophy and other subject areas, even if philosophy plays the role of a meta-discourse. This interdisciplinary approach highlights the extent to which the history of philosophical ideas is unavoidable, even if its point of departure is outside philosophy – in the experimental sciences, the human sciences or the arts" (Rohbeck citing Mireille Lévy, Daniel Bourquin, and Pierre Paroz 2011, 52). While I have combined both approaches in my own work as a philosophy instructor at the high school level, in this workshop I will focus on the curriculum integrative model that I established at my own high school.

At the Nineteenth International Workshop-Conference on Teaching Philosophy, I will first provide an overview of this integrative philosophy curriculum model, and then I will provide specific examples of how this model works in each of the five core subjects.

First, in general, my integrative model encourages high school students to become aware of underlying philosophical questions inherent in the five core subjects and to explore these questions logically and critically. To accomplish this, I have established areas in each of my high school's five academic departments where I provide a series of discussions with students that seek to teach them how and why to ask philosophical questions about the individual subjects that they are studying. After modeling this approach, I worked with my colleagues in each of their subject areas to continue to raise philosophical issues within their classes at various points through their courses.

After providing an overview of the model, I will share with participants in my workshop how this integrative model works in concrete classroom situations. Consider examples from each of the five subjects in turn.

- In English classes, I worked with students to ask philosophical questions about whether the novels and poems they were reading constituted art and how they might be distinguished from popular fiction or even films. I also worked with students to tease out some of the philosophical problems that characters raise within the context of the novels, such as the problem of evil raised in Weisel's *Night*.

- In history classes, I asked students to consider the limitation of historical methods and how to ask questions dealt with by philosophers of history, such as whether there are any laws governing historical events, like laws of physics.

- In language classes, students explored what it means to translate one language into another and to what extent two languages might be incommensurable. They also explored the limitations of thinking of language as learning a number of interchangeable names and whether Augustine's remarks in *Confessions* about how he learned Latin by pointing at objects and hearing what they were called was an adequate description of language-acquisition and, if not, then what other factors needed to be considered.

- In science classes, students studied the positivists, Popper, and Kuhn in order to explore how scientific theories explain the world and how they get changed, revised, or abandoned over time. This often led to a discussion of what it means to say that a scientific theory is "true."

- In mathematics, students learned some basic symbolic logic, including Venn diagrams, truth tables, and natural deduction. But, they also were asked to think about the ontological status of a number and about the nature of infinity, the latter by being introduced to the work of Leibniz and Cantor.

For many of these specific examples, I will provide participants with handout and power point slides that I used to encourage philosophical questioning in each of these subjects.

Once I have presented my approach to teaching philosophy across the curriculum, I will end with a discussion of the benefits and challenges for the integrative method. For example, I would argue that one of the chief benefits of this approach is that students learn to ask meta-questions about each of their subjects, thereby encouraging them to think more deeply and critically. I would also claim that philosophy is a natural glue to a high school curriculum. Too often I hear students who think that what they learn in one subject has no relevance to another. Teaching students to see the philosophical problems inherent in every subject helps to free them from some of the artificial boundaries of the standard curriculum; philosophy also frees them from their own arbitrarily imposed preconceptions and prejudices about these disciplines, such as the idea that mathematics is purely factually and literature is just subjective. Yet, there are also problems with the approach. Teachers can be reluctant to move beyond a purely conventional approach to their subject matter. Administrators need to determine if they should and have the financial means to hire philosophers to train teachers and whether these philosophers should be permanently made part of the faculty or work only as consultants.

I hope at the AAPT conference that the participants and I will not only discuss the merits and weaknesses of this integrative model, but that we will also discuss the challenges with implementing this approach.

Description of Handouts

I will provide participants with sample lessons that I have used, as well as the handouts that I have given the students during class. I will likely use a very limited number of power point slides to show lesson plans and student handouts as well.

Equipment

A projector and screen that will work with my laptop, a PC that runs Windows 7.

References

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