

Visual Art Practice as Philosophical Inquiry: Expanding Pedagogic Possibilities in the Quest for a Community of Reflective Thinkers

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Paul Carter writes of the conceptual engagement involved in art practice, 'What matters? What is the material of thought? To ask these questions is to embark on an intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process' (Carter, 2004:xi). Following from this statement, it might seem uncontroversial to suggest that art making can be a way of inquiring philosophically into the ideas, beliefs and values that shape human understandings. From a perspective of practitioners working within the artistic disciplines, this is likely to appear a more than acceptable assertion.

To non-artists, however, without personal experience in thinking through art production, the idea that art practice can be understood as philosophical inquiry is potentially problematic. For example, how can art practice be accommodated within the common modern critical-rationalist view that, 'The guiding ideal of philosophical endeavour is reasonableness or judicious rationality, even where the objective is to find the limits of such rationality'? (Lipman, 1988:173).

The American pedagogical program 'Philosophy for Children' (PFC) engages learners in critical discussions with the explicit aim of equipping them with the rational skills of philosophical inquiry. The goal of the program is to help students develop a cognitive and communicative toolkit of skills that can be carried and utilised throughout life. As such, the framework of PFC offers a constructive and insightful vehicle through which to define 'philosophical inquiry' and evaluate the proposal that visual art practice might satisfy this criteria. Furthermore, the benefit of PFC to the discussion of art practice as philosophical inquiry is further strengthened by current dialogues about the different kinds of contributions visual art can make to enrich the methodology of the PFC program itself.

Philosophy for Children

The origins of PFC began with a lecturer in Logic at Columbia University named Matthew Lipman. Lipman's motivation to develop PFC was his observation that university-aged learners often lacked the critical thinking skills essential in his subject area, and that they struggled to develop such skills after a life's accumulation of cognitive habits. Lipman, with his conviction that children are adept abstract thinkers and natural inquirers, dismissed any notion that young people could not or should not engage in philosophy. In 1969, he published *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, the 'first didactic philosophical novel to be written for children' (Lipman 1992b:3). It was followed four years later by a

teacher's manual to assist classroom teachers in implementing *Harry*. These two texts were the first components of what would later grow into a PFC curriculum spanning primary and high school.

In order to understand the nature and methodology of the PFC program, one must appreciate that Lipman comes from the tradition of analytic philosophy that emphasises meaning through drawing logic from language. The main influences on Lipman's thinking in the creation of PFC included; the developmental theorists Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner; such philosophical figures as Socrates, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and John S. Mill; and the American pragmatist philosophers George Herbert Mead, John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce.

In 1974, the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) was formed as part of Montclair State College, New Jersey, with Lipman appointed Director. Teacher training in PFC became available from 1977 and by 1988 the IAPC had developed a curriculum consisting of an additional six children's novels coupled with teacher's instructional guides. Today graduate students at Montclair State University can undertake: a Graduate Certificate in PFC; a Master of Arts in Teaching with PFC Certificate; a Master of Education Concentrating in PFC; and a Doctorate of Education in Pedagogy with a Specialisation in PFC. Over the past three decades, the PFC program has proliferated in schools across the world. In Australia there are Associations for Philosophy in Schools operating in every state.

The curriculum of PFC consists of the seven IAPC children's books and teacher's manuals. Each book focuses on reasoning skills within fields of inquiry appropriate to the developmental stage of the pupil. Through the storylines, philosophical problems emerge and through the character's conversations philosophical inquiry is modelled. Sections of this literature become the basis for discussion of the ideas, questions and problems raised by the texts.

These group conversations have no predetermined direction or conclusion. They are, however, given structure through rules of conduct that nurture a 'safe environment' where participants are supported in taking intelligent risks. Thus, the conversation of PFC is termed 'dialogue' as opposed to other forms of discussion where one opinion overrides others, answers are predetermined and finite, or uncertainty and self-questioning are viewed negatively.

This dialogue is also directed by the central goal of pursuing deeper meaning. The educational principle behind PFC is that, 'Meaning must be created, it cannot be given' (Morehouse, 1992:105). Therefore, no individual is seen to possess ultimate answers, rather meaning must be co-operatively constructed. This is achieved through utilising the tools of reasoning:

...students listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions. (Lipman, 1991:15)

In this process, cognitive obstacles such as assumption, stereotype, prejudice, indoctrination, contradiction and hypocrisy are cleared from the pathways of thought. Thus, the dialogue of PFC is also defined by being focused on *philosophical* inquiry.

Attempting values education has often meant schools have walked a fine line between 'authoritarian indoctrination' and instilling 'mindless relativism' (Lipman, 1988:50). PFC avoids these hazards by setting standards in the process and method of thinking, but no explicit criteria regarding the content of individual's ideas or values. Rather than instilling beliefs, the goal of this program is to produce an environment where students:

...find themselves ashamed to think badly and hate being found unreasonable. In other words, they have more than cleverness, more than mere cognitive skilfulness: They have standards – standards of reasoning, standards of inquiry, standards of conduct, standards of judgement. (Lipman, 1992a: 9)

When the above criteria are met the classroom is transformed into what Lipman terms a Community of Inquiry (COI). The COI constitutes the exclusive methodology of PFC in forming skilful, reflexive, independent child thinkers.

Community

The collective COI activity is intellectual and communicative praxis; an evolving microcosmic model of the adult societies possible for the future. Thus, it is misleading to limit discussion of Lipman's program to childhood alone. PFC requires the community to recognise and embrace the responsibility it shoulders for the constitution of future human beings, their institutions and culture, which result from the education currently being provided.

Lipman rails against what he terms 'socially patterned defects' (Lipman, 1988:19) or irrationalities, which are perpetuated throughout the generations by an education system that has largely been transfixed on education for testable learning rather than education for quality thinking. He states:

If we examine the present education system... we will be bound to conclude not simply that our educational system is imperfect but that its imperfections are more responsible than we have cared to admit for the grave circumstances in which the world currently finds itself. If we deplore our leaders and electorates as being self-centred and unenlightened, we must remember that they are the products of our education system. (Lipman, 1988:17)

The promise of PFC is to intercept the proliferation of these ingrained patterns of poorly developed thought through philosophical inquiry at the school level.

The long-term vision of PFC is plainly political. Lipman considers PFC an education for civic values, another of the program's intended outcomes being the formation of good citizens in the sense that, '...a democratic society consists of citizens equipped to assess how well the institutions of that society are working' (Lipman, 1988). For Lipman the formal structures of logical reasoning ultimately enforce such democratic values as due process, majority rule and minority rights (Lipman, 1988:22).

Over time, the structure of the COI becomes adopted in the thinking patterns of participants. Lipman maintains that such internalisation already occurs in education, but that the influence of irrational institutions too often produces children who do not behave rationally (Lipman, 1988). This idea that leads Lipman to argue:

...schools must prepare students for citizenship by affording them every possible exposure to and participation in the sorts of rational procedures that characterize adult society – in law, in diplomacy, in labor-management negotiations, in corporate organization wherever people mediate, search, criticize, examine precedents and traditions, consider alternatives, and in short reason together rather than have recourse to arbitrariness and violence. (Lipman, 1988:60)

Lipman's pedagogical call is a timely one. However, negotiating legal and economic structures is only one aspect of adult life and there are other elements - other than those 'rational procedures' mentioned - which are integral to the formation of a healthy, reasonable and balanced community of responsible citizens. Lipman's approach reflects the bias of critical rationality that has prevailed in Western thought since the seventeenth century. Both the language and emphasis of his theory implies that emotion, spirituality and creativity are of minimal relevance in the formation of philosophically engaged thinkers.

Art and philosophical inquiry

Danish advocate of PFC, Per Jespersen, argues that for the program to be meaningful to his culture Lipman's dependence on rational thinking skills must be revised, '...the texts and manuals build too much on logic – Danes are not trained in logic – or rather, as a teacher put it: we have passed that point' (Jespersen, 1993: pages unnumbered). Emphasising the importance of respecting differences in how individuals understand their world, he states, '...if you use the Lipman material, you kill the way Danes think' (Jespersen, 1993: pages unnumbered).

This challenge to the privileged role of logic in PFC throws into question the exclusively verbal nature of philosophical inquiry within PFC. For, while Lipman provides numerous justifications for his emphasis on discussion, his commitment to verbal dialogue ultimately rests on the view that speech has a unique relationship to the development of rational thinking skills.¹ For Lipman, these

¹ For example, Lipman states that speaking and listening form the basis of the basic skills of reading and writing, that the enjoyable process of conversation will encourage more children to engage with their education,

reasoning skills constitute the essential tools for doing philosophy. The sufficiency of this logical-linguistic definition of philosophical inquiry is questionable.

The aesthetic dimension of experience is an obvious area of human knowledge undervalued in PFC, and has accordingly been the subject of some discussion. There are at least two positions taken regarding the incorporation of art into PFC. On the one hand, there are those who tacitly accept that the methodology of inquiry must be logical-linguistic. Sally Hagaman's essay 'Pentimento: Conversations in the Art Classroom' indicates that while PFC has had a presence in art classrooms for years, it has been the *verbal* COI methodology that has been employed to support theoretical topics of art criticism, art history and aesthetics (Hagaman, 1992).

Australian academic Susan Wilks (Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne) is another vocal advocate for the incorporation of visual art into the PFC program. She has written:

The visual arts provide one avenue for supporting students and teachers when actively connecting information. It is helpful to have a physical object to focus on as you think and talk and learn. The presence of a visual representation permits checking points of argument by looking closer, or seeing something differently once someone else describes their perception. (Wilks, 2001:42)

Wilks' motivation is the worthy one of improving student skills in visual literacy; her research assists teachers and students in grappling with the aesthetic component of art appreciation. As the quote above reveals, in Wilks' view the philosophical activity - that is, the ideas, questions, challenges, responses - exists outside of the art making process. This attitude, that art merely provides enjoyable representations/embellishments of, or inspiration for, ideas and values, unfortunately has dominated most attempts by educators to include art making in PFC activities to date.

On the other hand, there are a small number who - like this author - suggest that the practice of creating art can constitute philosophical inquiry. Clinton Golding, in his article 'Philosophy for Children and Multiple Intelligences', argues that PFC is less effective than it could be because it has failed to heed the pedagogic revolution represented by Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). According to MI theory, PFC relies on only three of nine recognised intelligences. Those incorporated are, '...linguistic for dialogue; interpersonal for working as a community and mathematical-logical for reasoning and arguing' (Golding, 2004:16).

According to this theory, Lipman's philosophical inquiry discounts the contribution of Musical-Rhythmic, Visual-Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Intrapersonal, Naturalistic or Existential intelligences. Golding argues that it is possible to employ all the intelligences within the PFC program so that

and that willingness to engage in dialogue is the 'minimal condition of civility' in times of conflict and prejudice. (Lipman, 1988)

Rather than working in language first and then translating into another intelligence, students actually use the different intelligences to think through and explore the question or problem. (Golding, 2004:23)

As for inquiring through art making, Golding conceives of the process as one of creating metaphors, analogies and similes. He suggests that visual art as inquiry holds particular potential for engaging with the many philosophical problems, the full nature of which are difficult to express verbally.

Paul Carter presents an equally strong argument regarding the communicative power of art in his book *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*. Of works of art Carter states:

...the problem is, if anything, an excess of articulateness. Their way of communicating (strictly, their discourse) is four-dimensional. They are 'articulate' precisely because they are articulated – jointed or joined together – in a variety of ways and dimensions. Theirs is a symbolic representation of the phenomenal, a picture of the way the world is constructed that participates in its complexity rather than eliminates it. (Carter, 2004:xii)

For Carter, the intellectual inquiry involved in art making is uniquely capable of preserving the elaborateness of human experience. The full meaning in art is neither found encapsulated in the finished work, nor is it discovered in secondary language-based theoretical analyses of art objects. Rather, Carter asserts, it is woven through the matrix of artistic production of the work of art into the ultimate function of 'reinvention of social relations' (Carter, 2004:12-13). In this way, art making constitutes a process of creative research.

Carter fleshes out his theory by writing of six artistic collaborations in which he has been involved.² His viewpoint is one arrived at through direct engagement in artistic practice. Such articulations of the epistemology of art practice shed invaluable light onto the nature of art as a means of pursuing meaning. Importantly, though such accounts tend to emanate from art makers of professional calibre, the mode of inquiry they depict is one that should be equally available to human beings throughout their life, as accepted linguistic methods.

It is not possible to elaborate further on this claim here. However, the point must be made that the possibility of art practice as philosophical inquiry is not dependant on differentiations between 'amateur' and the 'professional' practice, nor influenced by social divisions between 'artistic' and 'unartistic' individuals. Art making, like Lipman's philosophical inquiry, should be recognised as a communicative tool available to all, the skills of which can be practised and refined in order to

² Carter argues that the lack of recognition given to creative research is perpetuated by scholarly writing *about* creative process. Instead, he calls for a discourse *of* material thinking that documents '...the making of a new social relation through a concomitant act of production'. (Carter, 2004:10)

engage conceptually and socially in more effective ways. Research into the developmental benefits of both art education and philosophy in schools support this claim.

The perspective of art makers themselves indicate how traditional concepts of philosophical inquiry do require re-evaluation, particularly where the goal of such inquiry is an applied one. In aiming towards positive social and political change in everyday life, as PFC does, there must be a recognition that:

A full understanding requires more than just a linguistic and logical understanding. It requires seeing a philosophical issue from many different perspectives. It requires experiencing a philosophical issue in a variety of ways. (Golding, 2004:20)

The practice of art has deeply significant contributions to make towards the creation a fuller understanding of life and our world. Margaret Macintyre Latta is Associate Professor of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is also a practising artist. Latta states,

I find that what I value is not so much 'art' but the aesthetic experience of making art: an experience that values my knowings, interpretations, and expressions; an experience that involves me in constructing meaning for myself ...
(Latta, 2001:49)

Latta reveals that recognition of art practice as philosophical inquiry hinges on the perceived legitimacy of aesthetic 'knowings, interpretations and expressions'. Her emphasis on making confronts the prevalent attitude that the cognitive contribution of visual art results from looking *at*, and talking *about*. PFC is a powerful pedagogical program because it empowers individuals to become independent thinkers through encouraging them to *do* philosophy. Similarly, what philosophical potential visual art possesses is made infinitely more meaningful through practice as an ongoing, reflexive process, of orienting and engaging oneself with the world.

Conclusion

This paper has raised the epistemological question of whether or not art practice can be understood as philosophical inquiry. It has done so via an examination of the positive contribution artistic production could potentially make to the pedagogical and social framework of inquiry set-up by PFC.

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has supported the assertion that the strictly logical-linguistic definition of philosophical inquiry found in PFC is out of step with contemporary thinking in education. The recognition that there are many different ways that an individual can encounter, understand and respond to their world allows the possibility that dedicated engagement in the creation of art can be another method of pursuing the 'examined life' advocated by Socrates. This

possibility exists independently of definitions between art practice as either 'professional' or 'amateur' status.

It has been shown that the perspectives of art makers are valuable in articulating how art making can form a primary, legitimate and conscious method of inquiring into concepts, knowledge, environment, beliefs, values, relationships and perceptions. Macintyre Latta expressed that it is the process, the active engagement in making more than the resulting object itself, which deepens the meanings and understandings reached. Carter appealed to his involvements in collaborative artistic projects to articulate his theory that producing art is an intellectual act of 'material thinking', which yields creative knowledge that is uniquely non-reductive in its handling of human and worldly matters. Through examination of such first-person accounts of art practice, a picture of the *unique* nature of the philosophical inquiry available through art making can be formed.

Finally, while this discussion has been built around the framework of PFC, the implications of the investigation hold relevance for more than just children, school education and the subject area of visual art. For, if PFC '...paradigmatically represents the education of the future as a form of life that has not yet been realised and as a kind of praxis' (Lipman, 1988:17), then by deepening philosophical inquiry to include art practice, the communicative and cognitive opportunities of future communities are expanded. In line with PFC's democratic spirit of pluralism and diversity, a responsibility now exists to recognise the value of the artistic skills of inquiry and dialogue practised through the creation of art, existing alongside the traditional logical-linguistic approach to doing philosophy.

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