

Creating a Community of Inquiry through Philosophy

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Do we need a science literate population in the Philippines? Do we want our children to face adulthood holding naïve scientific opinions? Do we want scientific misconceptions to grow in number? What do we really want for our children?

What best describes the kind of teaching method that children currently receive is spoon-feeding or teacher-centered. In this method, teachers conduct the learning process with children's mouths open and ready to swallow whatever ideas or information the former would provide. Since teachers are presumed to know everything, children become mere receptacles of their thoughts and ideas, no matter how bright, naïve, and dumb those ideas are.

Education goes deeper than "knowing" the basic facts of life. The goal of any education must be to develop a human being into a full person—a person capable of independent and critical thinking. In other words, education must produce "cultured" individuals. However, it is apparent that in the present system, children's learning of any subject matter is only constituted in having to acquire information. The status of learning is then being measured in terms of how much children can recall the deposited information. Produced therefore are children who are no different from a talking machine that simply imitates whatever sound was able to penetrate its system.

The traditional educational system's failure then is its disregard of the kind of students it was able to produce and utter failure to address its aims. Students who receive this kind of educational training fail to translate theory into practice. Students must learn how to apply what they theoretically learn inside the classroom to new real-life situations. In the

¹ *By cultured here is meant the capacity to think independently.*

prevailing educational system, therefore, students are implicitly being restrained to exhaust the creative and critical aspects of their thinking.

Yet, this is not to judge the above given process of learning acquisition as nonsense. Rather, it lacks some essential ingredients necessary for full learning and understanding, i.e., “critical thinking” and “analysis.” Hence, if the main objective of education is the production of students reasonable enough to face challenges in this world, they must have the capacity not just to think but to reflect and analyze critically matters offered unto them. For there would be no point in teaching the students, say, science, if they are not at the same time taught to think scientifically. Similarly, the main purpose of teaching any subject is to get the students to think in terms of the subject taught. To become fully educated means to be able to acquire the ability to consider each and every subject as a language and to use this ability to learn to think in that language.

This is where philosophy could be of great help. Philosophy begins with wonder. It consists in forming hypothesis through deduction, induction, critical thinking and analysis. Through philosophical method of inquiry, science education would become a journey through which teachers are adept at listening to the students’ inherent capacities of wonder, reflection, and continuous learning. To successfully go through this journey, teachers must be equipped with philosophical skills needed to effectively form a community of inquiry. Teachers must also be aware of the value of “philosophy for children” to ensure development of own views based on clear thinking and rational judgments.

Education, taken in this light, must not be confined to its traditional definition of being a mere transmission of knowledge for it limits the critical and creative promises of the students. Furthermore, it eliminates the very idea of a learning situation being a two-way process where teachers do not act as spoon-feeders but as facilitators creating a good learning environment. In this ideal two-way process, students’ bright and inquisitive ideas emerge and in the long run, create a community of interest. This community of interest, when formed and created leads to a more active and confident participation from and among students. Thus, to address the problem, and to further avoid the possibility of finding no difference at all between the method by which teachers were trained to do and the method by which they would be expected to teach, the traditional definition of education would have to be enhanced by yet another definition, i.e., education as the development of thinking and not merely as means to

¹*Critical thinking consists in taking time to examine, scrutinize and carefully evaluate ideas.*

²*Analysis pertains to the method of determining or describing the nature of a thing or idea by resolving it into parts and subjecting parts to careful scrutiny.*

transmit knowledge. Every subject would surely be easier to learn when its teaching is inspired with the influence of critical thinking.

Education then has to be conducted not in terms of compulsion which spoon-feeding does. Compulsion is an ingredient in the method that limits the students' capacities to explore the creative nature in them. In this light, therefore, it would be best to present every subject to students as some sort of an inspiration and motivation that can aid them not only in everyday life but in dealing with various personalities as well.

Nonetheless, if the educational system is to be suited for all these purposes, whatever "socially patterned defects" (such as outdated curriculum, poor learning environment, lack of facilities, lack of teachers training, among others) are to be found in the education system would have to be rooted out of the system to preserve and maintain quality education. "Classroom education would therefore have to be devoted to reasoning, to inquiry, to self-appraisal, until it turns into an exploratory, yet self-correcting, community where teachers and students are skilled both in fostering reflection and in engaging in it." (Lipman, 1988) In this way, a community of inquiry becomes operative where classroom education is transformed into a community of critical thinkers (where not only the teacher but classrooms of students with curious and evaluative minds interact).

But what does it require to create a community of inquiry? Of course, the task is not simple. It is imperative that both teachers and students share certain tasks. It is imperative as well that government critically intervene and do its job.

First, teachers must work within a set purpose and must act towards achieving this purpose. "Purpose is tied in with the things you think about and with how you think about them. The objects and events in your life get their purpose from the ways you see them and use them." (Boostrom, 1996) As teachers, directing the learning environment towards a set purpose (developing the students' capabilities, for example) would surely help in shaping and enhancing people's lives in society.

Second, with the creation of the community of interest that will foster critical thinking, teachers must be conversant with the major aspects of the discipline they teach and must use instructional methodologies appropriate to their discipline. They must be equipped with the very skills expected to be developed among students, and at the same time, they must be able to employ them in the classroom. Teachers are the students' exemplars, and as part of the creation of the community of inquiry, both teachers and students ought to share a love for this kind of learning. Students will find education an irresistible adventure only when teachers find it so.

Third, the teacher must exhibit the right attitude towards himself/

herself and towards students by having clear thoughts. Having the right attitude, and for that matter, having clear thinking entail "openness" and "attentiveness." "Openness means not jumping to conclusions too quickly. It means being willing to admit that you don't know something. It also means being willing to look for new ways of thinking and acting. People who are open-minded are willing to listen to others as well as to themselves... The right attitude is more than just being open, however. You also have to pay attention. You have to care about what you think in the same way that you care about what you eat or what you wear. It is because they care that good thinkers insist on clearing up what John Stuart Mill called 'confusion of thought.' And it is that eagerness to clear things up, to try to understand, that makes people good thinkers in the first place. They have the right attitude." (Boostrom, 1996)

When religiously practiced, teachers, in the process, gain more self-confidence in carrying themselves and in handling relationships with other people especially their students. In other words, there will be less to worry about.

If education has to become a two-way process, certain tasks have to be shouldered by students as well. In such case, students must learn how to evaluate any acquired information in accordance with their nature and desires. They must not absorb and accept ideas presented to them without evaluation. Students must further learn to exercise their rights to inquire about or to even question the things that they learn and discuss in the classroom. This stress to encourage critical thinking and analysis is of utmost importance in the creation of the community of inquiry. This must be done amidst the existing method that caters to the teachers' tyranny of right and wrong answers. The fact that there are teachers who think they have the privilege of tyranny is a strong army to fight. Nonetheless, the development of the community of inquiry armed with critical and evaluative minds would surely conquer the habit of relying on right and wrong answers. For it will introduce critical awareness that determines when such answers are either appropriate or inappropriate rather than to totally brand answers as either right or wrong.

If the creation of the community of inquiry would be permitted to serve as an educational paradigm then surely it will manifest a back-to-back reinforcement of concept and skills acquisition (which in this case refer to reasoning and analytical skills). In connection to this, there should be no reason for students to feel inhibited from exercising their rights to formulate and ask questions that will enhance the analytical and creative aspects in them.

Finally, the government must ensure that our children are provided with a good science education. This is possible through implementation

of the following recommendations:

1. conduct of training seminars on inquiry-based method of teaching (like the “philosophy for children” training seminar for teachers);
2. conduct of regular science curricular review;
3. integration of critical and analytical thinking skills into the science curriculum;
4. use of state-of-the-art laboratory equipment in teaching;
5. support for faculty development (such as advanced science studies, attendance to local and international conferences and scientific meetings) and research; and
6. creation of regional centers for young scientists.

With a good science education, our children can become the best they can be. Knowing how to think logically and scientifically, they can become successful and sensible Filipinos. They will be our teachers’ greatest contributions to Philippine society. They are Philippine society’s greatest contributions to the world.

In the light of this plea for educational reform, through the creation of the community of inquiry, let the ultimate goal of producing “thinking human beings” rather than “talking machines” shed the torch of realization that we are here in the first place to further stress that which puts us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom - reason.

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