Application for the AAP Prize for Innovation in Inclusive Curricula:

The *Big Questions* philosophy mentoring program

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INTRODUCTION

As a professional philosopher, I direct **The Philosophy Club**, a small social enterprise dedicated to the practice of collaborative philosophical enquiry with children in Melbourne and Sydney. The Philosophy Club has a website/blog <http://www.ThePhilosophyClub.wordpress.com> and a facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/ThePhilosophyClubAustralia>.

My Melbourne-based initiative, the ***Big Questions*** **philosophy mentoring program** ("*Big Questions*") is the only community-based learning program in Australia that is (a) designed to widen participation in philosophy to primary school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; and (b) designed specifically for senior undergraduate philosophy students, who have traditionally had little or no opportunity to undertake community-based learning as a complement to their formal studies. The *Big Questions* program has a dedicated website: <http://www.BigQuestionsProgram.wordpress.com>.

PROGRAM AIMS

Big Questions has two sets of aims, reflecting its two cohorts of participants: students from primary schools in low socio-economic status communities ("students"); and senior undergraduate philosophy students ("mentors").

To benefit students, *Big Questions* aims:

(1) to develop students' capacity for critical and creative thinking;

(2) to improve students' oral literacy;

(3) to build students' collaborative skills; and

(4) to ignite students' curiosity.

To benefit mentors, *Big Questions* aims:

(5) to engage mentors in meaningful experiential learning;

(6) to improve mentors' communication and facilitation skills;

(7) to build mentors' confidence; and

(8) to broaden mentors' philosophical practice.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

Twelve mentors are selected and trained in the art of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry among children. Subsequently, for two hours per week over eight weeks, the mentors visit a disadvantaged primary school to facilitate philosophical enquiry with 50 students in Years 4–6. Working in pairs, mentors are assigned to small groups of 8–10 students.

Throughout the program, mentors are offered ongoing training, support and debriefing opportunities.

FUNDING

The *Big Questions* program has been funded as follows:

- Seed funding for the 2013 implementation was awarded under the 'Schools First' school-community partnership scheme provided by the National Australia Bank, the Foundation for Young Australians and the Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Funding for the 2014 implementation has been promised by the University of Melbourne as an Equity Innovations grant under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program.

COURSE OUTLINE

This section outlines the twin courses that constitute *Big Questions*: the training course for mentors, and the philosophical enquiry course for students.

Training course for mentors

Mentor training comprises an introduction to purpose, theory and practice of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry (as endorsed by the international Philosophy for Children movement, which has philosophical roots in the American pragmatist tradition).

Mentors complete 45 hours of training, philosophical practice, dialogue facilitation, experiential learning and reflection, as detailed below.

Prior to their first school visit, mentors complete:

- 12 hours of training (seminars, workshops and masterclasses with experts in the field of Philosophy for Children);
- 2 hours of observation, participation and reflection as a Visiting Philosopher in a primary school philosophy classroom (at the King David School, Melbourne); and
- 5 hours of independent learning based on a tailored curriculum of curated written and audio-visual materials. Sample materials are:

  Bowker, M. H. (2010). Teaching Students to Ask Questions Instead of Answering Them. *Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, 127–134.

  Goering, S. (2008). Finding and Fostering the Philosophical Impulse in Young People. *Metaphilosophy*, *39*(1), 39–50.

  The Philosophy Shop (2010, January 26), *Knowledge – Justified, true belief theory and the Gettier problem* [video recording]. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ldGT2R-pJM

Sowey, M. (unpublished), *Facilitated philosophical dialogues among children* [audio recordings], The Philosophy Club archives.

Worley, P. (2009, Autumn). The Philosophy *In* Philosophy in Schools. *Think*, *8*(23), 63–75

Then, during their weekly school visits, mentors practise facilitating philosophical enquiry in a classroom setting during:

- 16 hours of face-to-face work with school children; and
- 10 hours of debriefing and further training.

Philosophical enquiry course for students

The philosophical enquiry course is composed of eight in-school sessions which elicit critical and creative thinking about a broad range of philosophical ideas and promote scaffolded collaborative learning.

Sessions are selected from a tailor-made and tested curriculum which includes rich stimulus materials to provoke thinking and philosophical questions to guide enquiry and dialogue.

Engaging multimedia stimulus materials – including thought experiments, visual stories, short films, dramatic role-play, audio soundtracks, inventions, drawings and puppetry – present ideas in ways that are entertaining and accessible to students of all ability levels.

Participating schools are invited to select eight sessions from the *Big Questions* curriculum:

Session title	**Philosophical themes**
Who's the boss of me?	Self-control and decision-making; free will and determinism; fate
Getting away with it	The point of being good; praise and blame; rules and laws
To boldly go where no child has gone before	Space travel; colonising other planets; encountering alien life; extra-terrestrial intelligence
What is it like to be a bat?	Communicating without a common language; sensory perception and experience; animal minds; empathy
Who, me?	Criteria for selfhood; continuity of personal identity; the role of memory
Me, myself and I	Cloning; individuality; ends and means; the risk of creating an underclass
Not fair!	Justice, surveillance and moral responsibility; ethical judgements and moral ambiguity; values
Living in the Matrix	The Experience Machine; reality and simulation; the value of authenticity
Ghost in the machine	Philosophy of mind; being conscious; the mind-body connection; knowledge of other minds

When things start to think	Real-life robots and artificial intelligence; Rube Goldberg machines, purpose and intention
My brother, the ape	Evolution, biology and culture; scientific and magical thinking; the dinosaur-and-egg paradox
Anyone could draw that!	Art and authorship; beauty and subjectivity; aesthetic judgements; art forgery
Whadd'ya know?	Ways of knowing; belief and superstition; truth and justification
Just lucky, I guess…	The existence of luck; destiny; coincidence; probability
Pobody's nerfect	Human perfection; collective moral responsibility; moral bio-enhancement.
Where's my jetpack?	Speculative futures; social evolution; utopias and dystopias; immortality.

RATIONALE FOR THE DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM IN VIEW OF THE AIMS OF THE PRIZE (1403 words)

This section highlights three aspects of the design of *Big Questions* that bear on the aims on the prize: (1) the focus on introducing philosophy to children; (2) the decision to partner with disadvantaged schools; and (3) the participation of university students as mentors in the program.

(1) Introducing philosophy to children

One relatively untapped but very promising avenue for making philosophy **accessible to a wide range of participants** is to introduce philosophy to children. It has been convincingly argued[1] – and borne out by decades of anecdotal evidence[2] – that children do indeed have the capacity to philosophise.

Furthermore, by providing children with a grounding in philosophical thinking, we can effectively inure them against widely-held negative attitudes towards philosophy. Many adults harbour attitudes of irrational fear, aversion or even antipathy towards philosophy.[3] By introducing the practice of philosophy to school children through collaborative enquiry, we can promote the value and relevance of philosophical thinking to an otherwise elusive audience.

Empirical studies[4] conducted internationally show that the practice of collaborative philosophical enquiry in schools has marked cognitive and social benefits for students, as described below.

Cognitive benefits of philosophical enquiry

Philosophical enquiry cultivates rigorous intellectual habits which improve students' skills in reasoned argument and higher-order thinking. These habits include insightful questioning, creative thinking, critical reflection, active open-mindedness, sound judgement, self-correction, articulate self-expression and respectful dialogue.[5]

Philosophical enquiry cultivates deep and deliberative thinking – often neglected in traditional schooling, which tends to focus more on getting 'the quick right answer' – and thus enables students to investigate the nuances of complex ideas. Practising philosophy improves students' ability to construct cogent arguments, to rationally defend their views, to evaluate their own and others' arguments, to question assumptions and to analyse the implications of beliefs. Students are expected to give examples and counterexamples, recognise mistakes in reasoning, make distinctions and draw analogies.[6]

Where philosophy has been systematically incorporated into school curricula, students' performance has measurably improved in verbal, non-verbal and quantitative reasoning.[7]

Big Questions helps students to develop a broad range of interdisciplinary thinking capacities and communication skills specified by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.[8]

Personal and social benefits of philosophical enquiry

By engaging in constructive dialogue with a community of co-enquirers, students learn how to examine their own beliefs and how to express them clearly to others. They develop confidence in speaking their minds and a sense of responsibility for their opinions and actions. Students also become more aware of the ethical issues that touch their lives as well as of the thinking tools that can help them develop their own values and principles.

Because philosophical enquiry involves students in the consideration of alternative points of view, students develop greater respect for diversity and deeper empathy for the experiences of others. Students become more attentive and fair-minded in their interactions, more skilled at cooperating and negotiating, and better able to resolve disagreements.[9]

In these ways, philosophical enquiry fosters productive collaboration and develops students' self-esteem, confidence, self-expression and capacity for respectful dialogue. Where philosophical enquiry has been systematically incorporated into school curricula, measurable improvement has been observed in students' socialization, including self-esteem, confidence, class ethos and discipline.[10]

Big Questions engenders a sense of inclusive community in which **wide participation is encouraged** and all participants' voices are heard.

(2) Addressing socio-economic and educational disadvantage through partnerships with disadvantaged schools

Big Questions is unique in Australia in introducing the practice of philosophy to primary school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It represents a strategic step towards broadening participation in philosophy and **improving its accessibility to population groups that have traditionally been excluded from the discipline**.

Peter Worley (CEO of the Philosophy Foundation, UK) argues that an early introduction to philosophy can empower children from low socio-economic status [SES] backgrounds, intellectually, socially and politically:

> Philosophy [is] often seen as the domain of the middle classes and therefore it seems that many of those not in these groups find the intellectual process inaccessible to them. I argue that a grounding in philosophy from primary school onwards has the potential to unlock these intellectual doors to many otherwise potentially disenfranchised citizens. I believe that philosophy has the ability to increase the autonomy of the citizens of any democratic society and the positive freedom of individuals… There is potentially no intellectual forum closed to anyone who has assimilated philosophical reasoning methods. By the time the students who have participated in a philosophy programme in primary school reach a mature age and are engaging with adult themes for themselves they will already be used to long words and complex, abstract reasoning regardless of their family or class background, they should therefore feel no barrier between themselves and any kind of intellectual exchange.[11]

Big Questions is one such program that unlocks intellectual doors.

From the earliest years of schooling, students from low SES backgrounds in Australia experience educational disadvantage. There continues to be an unacceptable gap between low SES students and other students on a range of measures including school engagement, educational achievement, educational aspiration, school completion and rate of progression to tertiary education. Those students from low SES backgrounds who do reach university remain underrepresented in fields like philosophy, and are less likely to find places in the most prestigious institutions.[12]

There are good reasons to believe that programs like *Big Questions* can make a difference in overcoming the systematic entrenchment of educational disadvantage; in instilling an appreciation for the value of philosophical thinking; and in alleviating the alienation from university culture often experienced by low SES students (particularly those whose parents have had low levels of education).[13]

In general, programs geared towards primary education can raise students' aspirations and achievement and can improve rates of access to university by low SES students in subsequent years.[14] Furthermore, *Big Questions* was designed specifically to respond to a range of evidence-based recommendations for promoting educational equity. The program design engages students in deep learning tasks that they regard as interesting, challenging and important;[15] involves regular visits to primary schools by university students, thereby boosting students' motivation, confidence and self-belief;[16] increases behaviour expectations among students and strengthens peer support;[17] broadens students' horizons; and builds the capacity of low SES schools to boost aspirations and to support high achievement.[18]

Big Questions thus features a variety of innovations in classroom teaching **that can be expected to improve retention rates of under-represented student groups** at school and potentially, in the longer term, at university. If *Big Questions* students do enter university, it is reasonable to suppose that they will be more open to studying philosophy there; having had enjoyable experiences of philosophising at a younger age, they are likely to regard philosophy as a subject that is personally relevant to them.

(3) Involving university students as mentors

Big Questions is truly innovative: it is the only program in Australia that connects primary school students with highly trained philosophical thinkers. This offers benefits not only for the students, but also for the mentors who work with them.

Mentors benefit by developing their general capabilities through a range of special educational, professional experience and civic participation opportunities. Specifically, *Big Questions* builds mentors' confidence, broadens their professional practice and hones their conceptual, communication and facilitation skills. *Big Questions* invigorates mentors' passion for the discipline of philosophy, engages them in teaching and learning, and offers them a powerful and satisfying experience of civic engagement.

Mentors report having particularly appreciated the opportunity to apply their philosophical learning to enhancing the wellbeing of the community. One mentor commented:

> Sometimes, it feels like studying philosophy, although enjoyable, does not [provide the opportunity] to be actually useful. This program presents the opportunity to make a real difference to people's lives, while doing something that I enjoy... There is not much point in studying philosophy if there is no possibility of using its insights to make a difference.

The unique educational opportunities afforded to mentors through the *Big Questions* program **may improve retention rates of these exceptional individuals within the profession of philosophy**. In such a case, their continued presence in the field would likely contribute to shifting the culture of academic philosophy away from an adversarial "philosophy-seminar-as-gladiatorial-arena" model (characterised by attitudes of belligerence, aggression, combativeness, scorn and condescension)[19] and towards a more cooperative and respectful model (characterised by collaboration, consideration of a broader range of views, negotiation, joint deliberation and mutual learning). **Such a culture shift would in turn make philosophy more accessible to a wider range of participants.**

PROGRAM EVALUATIONS AND OTHER SUPPORTING EVIDENCE OF FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

This section refers to the inaugural implementation of *Big Questions* at Mahogany Rise Primary School (VIC) in August – September 2013. Twelve mentors and 50 students participated.

The formal program evaluation included analysis of structured feedback from the participating university students, school staff and school students. Most of the feedback consisted of qualitative self-report and observations (by mentors and school staff) of perceived impact.

This section presents **evidence demonstrating that the program achieved each of its aims**. It also presents evidence that the program was effective as a whole. For each aim, quantitative evidence is presented (where available), followed by qualitative evidence in the form of direct quotations from evaluation surveys completed by school staff, mentors and students.

Evaluation of student outcomes against program aims

Aim 1: To develop students' capacity for critical and creative thinking

Quantitative evidence

Survey results indicate that mentors' agreement with the statement *"**I think the program helped the students improve their collaborative thinking skills**"* was high, rated at a mean score of 4.22 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

Qualitative evidence

"We were hoping that students would begin to understand **critical thinking** and the process of working through issues in a systematic way. The program was **exceedingly successful and achieved above and beyond my expectations**. The impact was interesting in that students **asked questions in a more astute way** and began to ponder broader social questions." (Principal)

"The program exceeded all expectations. It introduced a new way of thinking and being in the world to our children. Speaking, listening, **thinking** and co-operation skills were all **significantly enhanced**." (Assistant Principal)

"A good way to develop debating and **logical thinking** skills. They also have learned that it's OK to alter their position." (Year 6 teacher)

"I do think the kids became more adept at attempting to **explain reasons for their views** better. Some children became particularly good at expressing that they disagreed with some elements and agreed with others." (Mentor)

"It was also very encouraging to see how much they enjoyed **engaging in arguments** and working with each other." (Mentor)

"I think it helped to **improve their basic reasoning skills** - I noticed kids saying 'I think X *because* Y' more and more over the three days rather than simply 'I think X' and then having to prompt them for their reasons (or if I did have to prompt them, they were able to give one instead of saying 'I don't know' or repeating their point)." (Mentor)

"This experience has also given me insight into the way that philosophy can help children **think and analyse issues and arguments** beyond what they are asked to do in the primary school curriculum." (Mentor)

"I like how we question each other, and disagree and agree, and build on each others' ideas… **like we're real philosophers**." (Student)

"I learned that you can disagree with people and everyone has **different arguments**." (Student)

Aim 2: To improve students' oral literacy

Quantitative evidence

Survey results indicate that mentors' agreement with the statements *"**I think the program helped the students improve their listening skills**"* and "*I think the program helped the students improve their speaking skills*" were very high, rated at a mean score of 4.44 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

Qualitative evidence

"**Speaking, listening**, thinking and co-operation skills were all **significantly enhanced**." (Assistant Principal)

"There was so much that was fascinating, but for me it was amazing listening to these students **express themselves with confidence** and, at times, with meta-cognition." (Year 6 teacher)

"[As a result of the program] the students appear to be more accepting of others' opinions, and now have **strategies to politely express** their own." (Year 6 teacher)

"It was very rewarding to see and participate in the **students' discussions** and see them **improve over just three weeks**." (Mentor)

"The most interesting thing I learned was: **don't be scared to share your opinions**, whether you disagree or not." (Student)

In response to the question *What did you like best about the program?*, one student wrote: "**Sitting and discussing because at home I don't talk**." (This was not an atypical response. Many of the students had a very low baseline oral literacy, and class teachers suggested that this is partly due to an absence of conversation in their home lives.)

Aim 3: To build students' collaborative skills

Quantitative evidence

Survey results indicate that mentors' agreement with the statement ***"I think the program helped the students improve their collaborative thinking skills"*** was high, rated at a mean score of 4.22 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

Qualitative evidence

"I think the program deepened students understanding and consideration of their fellow students, leading to **improved relationships and behaviour**." (Mentor)

"I think that it was most beneficial in terms of improving children's behaviour and conduct around their peers and adults. **Learning to disagree without upsetting others** is an extremely important skill." (Mentor)

"Speaking, listening, thinking and **co-operation** skills were all **significantly enhanced**." (Assistant Principal)

"I liked sharing ideas because it helped me to understand everyone. I liked how we **responded to each other's ideas politely**." (Student)

"I liked **working together** because we have good ideas." (Student)

Aim 4: To ignite students' curiosity

Qualitative evidence

"The biggest hook for the children was the use of the video narrative. **The children were captivated** by this." (Assistant Principal) (This comment refers to a series of original philosophical short films tailor-made for the *Big Questions* program.)

"The questions were **interesting** and the show was entertaining. We got to **experience new things** and have fun!" (Student)

Asked to describe the program in their own words, students came up with a broad array of positive descriptors including: "**supergenius**", "**fantastic**", "**extraordinary**", "**amazing**" and "**braintwisting**".

Evaluation of mentor outcomes against program aims

Aim 5: To engage mentors in meaningful experiential learning

Quantitative evidence

Survey results indicate that mentors were unanimously in full agreement with the statement *"**I feel that being a mentor was meaningful and worthwhile**,"* rated at a mean score of 5 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

Mentors' agreement with the statement *"**I feel that I was a positive role model for the students**"* was very high, rated at a mean score of 4.44 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

Qualitative evidence

"**I really valued the opportunity** to get the kids to think about the difficult issues we covered. It was **especially rewarding** to see the kids engage and offer their insights." (Mentor)

"I grew to appreciate these kids and their ideas, and found a bit of humility in these classrooms." (Mentor)

Aim 6: To improve mentors' communication and facilitation skills

Quantitative evidence

Survey results indicate that mentors' agreement with the statement *"**Being a mentor has improved my communication skills**"* was high, rated at a mean score of 4.33 (on a scale of 0–5).

Qualitative evidence

"I think my own **listening and comprehension skills improved** by attempting to interpret accurately what the children were trying to say." (Mentor)

"[I gained] **clearer communication skills**, being able to be flexible enough to accommodate challenges and needs as they arise... [and] patience!" (Mentor)

"It has **improved my communication skills** (particularly with kids) but in general just being more clear and simple when asking in-depth questions." (Mentor)

"[I developed] **skills to behaviourally manage a class** of children, clearer communication skills (with kids), **group facilitation skills**." (Mentor)

Aim 7: To build mentors' confidence

Quantitative evidence

Survey results indicate that mentors' agreement with the statement "***Being a mentor has improved my self-confidence***" was high, rated at a mean score of 4.11 (on a scale of 0–5).

Qualitative evidence

"**I do feel more confident** about my ability to facilitate a potentially difficult conversation." (Mentor)

Aim 8: To broaden mentors' philosophical practice

Qualitative evidence

"Valuable volunteering experience... Also, it gave me some **first-hand experience with philosophical pedagogy**." (Mentor)

"I will definitely try and **incorporate many of the discussion techniques in the classroom throughout my career**. Having a deeper understanding of educational disadvantage and generational poverty at the primary school level will also be of benefit and will continue to influence my career decisions." (Mentor)

"**The mentors role modelled the skills and dispositions of philosophical inquiry** as well as more general life skills such as respect, cooperation and care." (Assistant Principal)

"**The mentors truly listened** to the students and modelled the behaviour that they expected." (Year 6 teacher)

"**I gained a significant insight into the different ways kids learn** and the obstacles existing in classrooms in disadvantaged schools." (Mentor)

Evidence of overall program effectiveness

Program management and delivery

"The detailed planning and follow through with the topic was a highlight. The management, planning and development was outstanding. It was a fantastic program and was well received by students, staff and myself. *Big Questions* opened up possibilities that weren't there before and has given students and staff the confidence to embrace such programs in the future." (Principal)

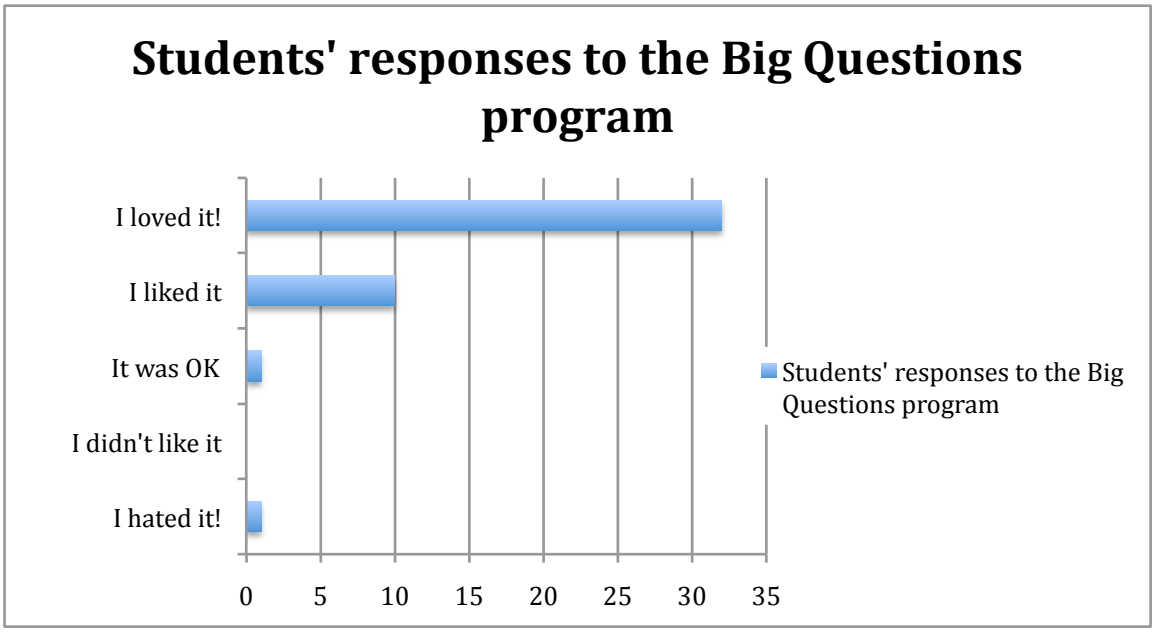
"Very satisfied with the program management [which] could not have been more organised or more approachable. Thank you for inspiring our school community with the *Big Questions* program. You're amazing!" (Assistant Principal)

"I think the program ran excellently." (Mentor)

"I loved the whole program so much! It couldn't have been better!" (Student)

Student experience

Forty-four students responded to a simple post-program survey designed to assess their enjoyment of the program. Over 95% of the respondents either "***loved***" or "***liked***" the program, as depicted in the following graph:



Mentors made the following further comments about the students' experience:

"It was also very encouraging to see how much they enjoyed engaging in arguments and working with each other. That reinforced to me that **anyone is capable of doing philosophy** and that **most people, if given the opportunity and the right setting, are willing and interested** in getting involved in it."

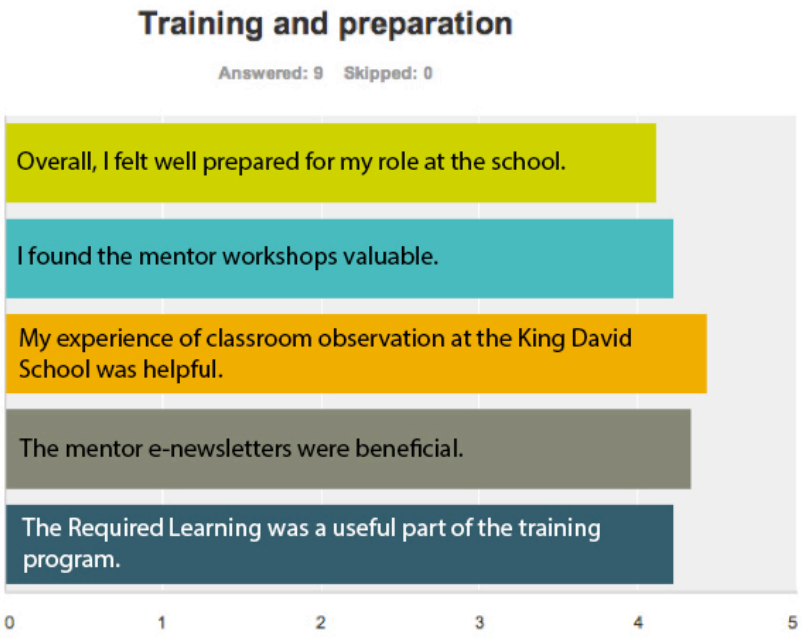
"I think they **certainly benefited from having their views heard and taken seriously by adults**. That seemed to really be quite a new experience for most of the kids."

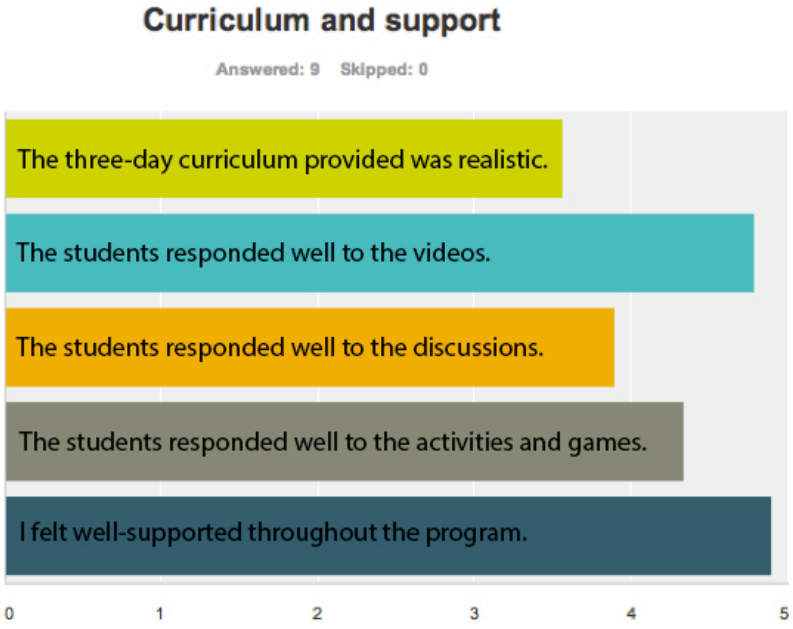
Mentor experience

Throughout the program, mentors regularly spoke to me about their enjoyment of the learning process, and commented that their role in *Big Questions* was unique in their experience. One mentor described it as "a fantastic opportunity to gain practical experience in the task of applying philosophical skills beyond a university classroom environment." Another wrote: "I would like to see philosophy take on a meaningful existence outside of the professionalised realm of the universities. The study of philosophy is a specialised field like any other, but the practice of philosophy is open to anyone with a passion for asking questions."

During a mentor training workshop, one mentor said: "**I think that this** [method of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry] **should really be taught in first year, as part of our undergraduate philosophy degree**." The other mentors agreed that philosophy tutorials and seminars would likely be more productive and collegial if this kind of training were part of the mainstream undergraduate experience.

Quantitative feedback from mentors





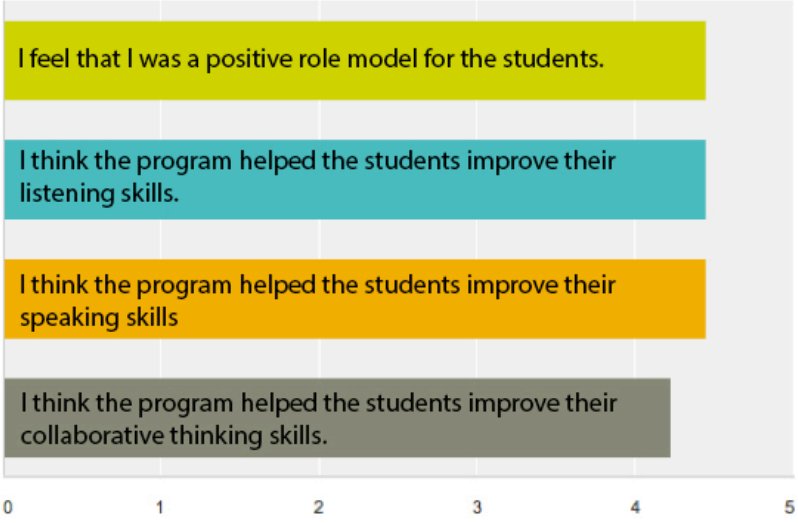
A note about the viability of the 'three-day curriculum': The partner school in 2013 was located more than 50km from Melbourne's CBD, requiring our volunteer mentors to make long commutes. To lessen the travel burden, we chose to condense the in-school program delivery into three full days. This structure had limited success, as it demanded from the school students long periods of focused attention which they struggled to sustain. For our program implementation in 2014, we are selecting a school closer to the CBD, enabling more frequent and briefer school visits.

How being a mentor has affected me

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0

Perceived impact on the students

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



APPENDIX: THE EVOLUTION OF *BIG QUESTIONS*, 2012 – 2014

Year	Events, partners and participants
2012	The *Big Questions* program, while still in development, inspired a conference entitled 'The Thoughtful Classroom: Teaching to Overcome Educational Disadvantage'. This conference, which I convened, focused on the practice of philosophical enquiry in primary schools and its potential to promote educational equity and social inclusion. The conference was hosted by the University of Melbourne on 2 June 2012 and was co-presented by the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA), the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools (VAPS) and the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education. The event involved a full day of presentations, workshops and panel discussion featuring distinguished guest speakers Professor Tom Wartenberg (USA), Dr Ron Ritchhart (USA), Professor Lynne Hinton (Queensland University of Technology), and Associate Professor Philip Cam (University of NSW).
2013	The *Big Questions* pilot launched in 2013 with the cooperation of the University of Melbourne and Monash University. Partners in the launch of the program were The Philosophy Club and Mahogany Rise Primary School, a low SES primary school in Melbourne's south. Located in an area of grave socio-economic disadvantage, Mahogany Rise Primary School suffers declining enrolments and poor academic outcomes. Student literacy levels are markedly below state averages and many students fail national literacy benchmarks. Achievement Improvement Monitor data show results in the bottom 10% of the state for reading, writing, spelling and mathematics. Attitudes to School Survey data indicate that measures of wellbeing, teaching and learning, and student relationships are significantly below state averages. Mahogany Rise Primary School has welcomed *Big Questions* as a means of developing students' higher-order thinking skills; improving educational attainment; increasing cooperation among students; and building school engagement. A cohort of 12 senior undergraduate philosophy students from the University of Melbourne and Monash University were recruited via a competitive selection process. The students participated on a voluntary basis and were not awarded academic credit. Seed funding was awarded under the NAB 'Schools First' school-community partnerships scheme.
2014	This year, the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Arts has joined as a *Big Questions* program partner and has offered Equity Innovations (HEPPP) funding for the program. Prospective partner schools are currently being short-listed, and a new cohort of mentors is being recruited from among senior undergraduate philosophy students at the University of Melbourne.

ENDNOTES

[1] See for example Worley, P., Enquiry vs. Philosophy. *Teaching Thinking and Creativity*, 9:2/Issue 27. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from www.peterworley.com/Publications_and.../EnquiryvsPhilosophy.pdf

[2] See for example Matthews, G., (1984). *Dialogues with Children*. Harvard University Press.

[3] See Worley, P. (2009, Autumn). The Philosophy *In* Philosophy in Schools. *Think*, *8*(23), 63–75. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from http://www.peterworley.com/Publications_and_Articles_files/Philosophyinp4c.pdf

[4] Summarised in Millett, S. & Tapper, A. (2012, July). Benefits of Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry in Schools. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *44*(5), 546–567.

[5] See Wilks, S. (Ed.) (2005). *Designing a Thinking Curriculum*. ACER Press. See also Sprod, T. (1999). Philosophy, young people and well-being. *Youth Studies Australia*, *18*(2), 12–16.

[6] See Hinton, L. (2011). Making a Difference Through Philosophy. In T. Wrigley, P. Thomson, & R. Lingard (Eds), *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference* (pp. 15–26), Routledge.

[7] See Topping, K. J. & Trickey, S. (2007), Collaborative philosophical enquiry for school children: Cognitive effects at 10-12 years. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 271–288.

[8] See *Big Questions: Essential Learning (AusVELS)*. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from http://bigquestionsprogram.wordpress.com/philosophical-enquiry/essential-learning-ausvels/

[9] See Hinton, L. (2011). Making a Difference Through Philosophy. In T. Wrigley, P. Thomson, & R. Lingard (Eds), *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference* (pp. 15–26), Routledge.

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