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UNVEILING AND PACKAGING: A MODEL FOR PRESENTING PHILOSOPHY IN SCHOOLS

MICHELLE SOWEY

Abstract: As a philosopher and a reflective practitioner of philosophy in schools, I explore two aspects of presentation which I call *unveiling* and *packaging*. Both aspects bear on the work of designing and facilitating philosophy workshops for school students. I describe *unveiling* philosophy as a practice of collaborative inquiry and dialogic argument: social processes that foster thinking skills and dispositions, an evaluativist epistemology, and a range of constructive norms. I then discuss *packaging* philosophical materials in ways that create effective stimuli for thinking. I encourage educators engaged in designing or curating stimuli to draw on the rich diversity of available media, to focus on the quality of both the philosophical content and its creative expression, and to ensure that the content connects with students' life experiences. I propose five criteria for judging the likely effectiveness of a philosophical stimulus: that it activate emotion, induce perplexity, challenge intuitions, ignite controversy and elicit reasoned argument. I offer three detailed examples of high school philosophy workshops to illustrate the practical application of these criteria, and to illuminate fruitful possibilities for arranging stimuli, including using a Provocation-Complication sequence or arranging stimuli as elements in a more complex puzzle.

Keywords: philosophy in schools, collaborative inquiry, dialogic argument, evaluative thinking, stimulus for inquiry, reflective practice.

Introduction

I would like to share some reflections on the presentation of philosophy from my perspective as a workshop designer and facilitator of collaborative philosophical inquiry and dialogic argument (henceforth CPIDA) among school students. In this work, I help students progress as philosophers by engaging them in collaborative small-group workshops designed to develop their understanding and judgement. My intention is to foster the dispositions, skills and personal resources that students need in order to think well, communicate clearly, and engage in public reasoning. My philosophy programs therefore differ from others that are primarily concerned with familiarising students with canonical figures and arguments. While elements of the history of philosophy sometimes surface in my workshops, my broad vision is to mobilise CPIDA in the service of preparing students for their personal and civic lives, and especially for their participation in a deliberative democracy.

I will describe two aspects of presentation as they bear on this work, taking presentation firstly in the sense of *unveiling*—that is, revealing a philosophical practice; and secondly in

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the sense of *packaging*—that is, designing, curating and arranging philosophical materials. After examining each of these aspects in turn I will offer some detailed examples from my high school workshops.

Unveiling Philosophy

My workshops present philosophy to students as a collaborative practice of both shared inquiry and dialogic argument. Entering the dialogic space, students embark on "friendly excursions into disequilibrium" (Johnson & Johnson, cited in Kohn, 2017) where they encounter divergent and often challenging points of view. Students come to see the importance of remaining actively open-minded: welcoming criticism, taking opposing positions seriously and evaluating them fairly. By the same token, students discover the value they can contribute as supportive, critical interlocutors who can identify the implications of their peers' claims, question their criteria for making judgements, raise objections, and offer alternative points of view.

With sufficient experience of CPIDA, each student can learn to be their own interlocutor and engage in an internal dialogue that challenges their own thinking (Reznitskaya, 2012). Meanwhile, for novice philosophers, thinking together affords opportunities that solitary introspection does not: opportunities to frame problems better, to test out particular ideas and arguments, and to overcome cognitive biases and entrenched beliefs.

Even more fundamentally, CPIDA enables students to establish and refine community norms of effective thinking. If students were flying solo, they would struggle to assess the clarity, accuracy, coherence, plausibility, significance and relevance of their ideas. As Ellerton (2015) points out, students may not even realise that these are norms worth valuing, since such realisations only dawn in the social processes of constructing and evaluating arguments. Ellerton (2017) further proposes that thinking well is, in part, "about learning how to think *with* others, to in effect become part of a broader social cognition that can achieve more collectively than is possible individually" (p. 11).

Engaging in CPIDA is a key to developing students' respect for epistemic rigour and rational engagement—values that each student will subsequently be in a position to internalise. Without such opportunities to think collaboratively, and lacking the tools to discriminate among competing knowledge claims on the basis of evidence and argument, adolescents "typically fall into 'a poisoned well of doubt', and they fall hard and deep" (Kuhn & Park, 2005, p. 113, citing Chandler, 2003). In light of this tendency, cultivating shared evaluative reasoning is crucial. A driving force in my work is the desire to help students move beyond epistemological relativism—to help them recognise that while everyone is entitled to their beliefs, this does not render all beliefs equally reasonable. As Kuhn (2003) points out, "some opinions are in fact better than others, to the extent that they are better supported by argument and evidence" (p. 20). Once philosophy is unveiled as (among other things) an evaluative practice, students begin to understand knowledge as consisting of judgements that can be evaluated according to criteria—criteria which are themselves open to evaluation. The practice of CPIDA reveals the value of philosophical dispositions: being curious, open-minded, amenable to reason, and ready to self-correct.

Through their practice, students perceive their own accountability. It is not enough to make their *positions* clear to their peers, they discover; they must also make their *reasoning* clear.

Packaging Philosophy

I come now to the presentation of philosophy as the packaging of materials. In the design of workshops I am continually engaged in packaging content in ways that most vividly acquaint students with philosophical problems and lay the groundwork for them to philosophise together. Philosophical content thus packaged constitutes a *stimulus* for thinking and—arranged together with other stimuli and opportunities for philosophical responses—establishes a structure within which I foster students' philosophical thinking.

The use of stimuli (sometimes called 'prompts' or 'provocations') has been a defining feature of philosophical inquiry with children since the field emerged in the 1970s with the publication of a series of philosophical novels by Lipman (see Oyler, 2016). These novels underpinned a primary school curriculum in reasoning. Rooted in pragmatist ideals of reflective education, Lipman's curriculum highlighted the classroom community of inquiry as a milieu for the social construction of knowledge. The past half-century has seen a proliferation of philosophy in schools programs around the world, many of which have retained the community of inquiry model even as they have decoupled from Lipman's curriculum and embraced alternative stimuli that are more flexible, topical, or culturally- relevant. Striking the right balance between philosophical content and literary/artistic merit remains a challenge, given that creators of custom-made stimuli are rarely highly accomplished in both areas. In the decades after publishing his seminal novels, Lipman himself objected to deficiencies in many other philosophical stories for children, remarking: "If I were asked to say what I find to be [their] chief flaws […] I would say that some of them were all story and no philosophy while others are all philosophy and no story" (Lipman, 2002, p. 12). Achieving a suitable balance in this regard—where 'story' is interpreted loosely to refer to any narrative or otherwise expressive output—remains in my view a key priority for designers and curators of philosophical stimuli.

A diversity of packages

Material for a fertile philosophical encounter can be packaged in any number of forms besides the conventional treatise, essay or scholarly article. Lam (cited in Weinberg, 2020), academic philosopher and creator of the popular narrative journalism-cum-philosophy podcast *Hi Phi Nation*, draws attention to some fundamental differences between the aims of academic philosophy and those of philosophy for the general public, going so far as to say that "the design features that make for good academic philosophy might make for terrible public philosophy". Much academic philosophy, he observes, is "engineered for epistemic justification […] [such that] every matter of misrepresentation, uncharitable reading, or objection, must be anticipated and alleviated", whereas narrative-driven public philosophy is engineered for "engagement, attention-holding, tension-creation, and resolution" (Lam, 2020, cited in Weinberg).

As a genre of public philosophy, philosophical inquiry among children must first and foremost engage its participants. Workshop designers can choose from materials that are:

- verbal: fictional stories, historical tales, myths, parables, creative nonfiction, journalism, poetry, anecdotes (Worley, 2014);
- visual: artworks, picture books, comics, graphic images;
- multimedia: documentary films, animated videos, recorded speeches or interviews, music clips, interactive websites;
- theatrical: Reader's Theatre, scripted or semi-scripted dialogues, dramatic performances, puppetry;
- satirical: mock TV advertisements, posters or campaign brochures that promote fictional goods or services;
- ludic: puzzles, games, or conceptual exploration activities;
- artefactual: evocative objects.

The multiplicity of options is beneficial because, as Garlikov (n.d.) observes, relatively few students find school material, when presented in textbook or lecture form, sufficiently interesting or meaningful to bother thinking about in ways that will help them see its point or extract their own meanings and implications from it.

In my experience, assembling several types of stimuli, each of which sheds light on a different aspect of a given theme—and supporting students as they investigate each stimulus in turn—is a blueprint for the most satisfying experiences of CPIDA.

Most of the types of stimuli I have mentioned can be effective vehicles for the presentation of counterfactuals, imagined scenarios, and thought experiments. In contrast to the pared-back thought experiments typically found in the academic literature, however, elaborated scenarios seem to appeal more to young philosophers. Where possible, I seek stimuli that provide thick descriptions, vivid and believable character motivations, and a richness of contextual detail that connects the philosophical ideas with students' life experiences. I find near-future science fiction an especially compelling genre for activating students' imaginations and drawing them into the domain of the hypothetical. As Schwitzgebel (2014) says of science fiction and speculative fiction more generally, "[t]he specificity of the possibilities considered, and its emotional and imagistic power, engages parts of the mind that more abstract forms of speculation leave hungry."

Designing effective stimuli

On the basis of my classroom experience I have identified five criteria for judging the likely effectiveness of a CPIDA stimulus for use in schools.

The first criterion is that the stimulus *activate emotions*. This is crucial for engaging students because, as Immordino-Yang (2016) explains, it is "neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion […] [W]e only think about things we care about" (p. 18). With this in mind, I seek affectively-engaging stimuli that will kindle empathy, delight, shock, unease, indignation, contempt, or any number of other emotions. Immersive stimuli that make use of humour and suspense are notably effective in eliciting students' emotional responses. If, as Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue, "reasoning divorced from emotional implications […] lack[s]

meaning and motivation and [is] of little use in the real world" (p. 9), then we educators have every reason to attend to students' emotional responses to the stimuli we present.

One of Dewey's (1938/1998) aphorisms affirms that "the most important attitude that can be formed is […] the desire to go on learning" (p. 49). Since I see it as part of my role as an educator to induce this desire, I am not content for a stimulus merely to arouse students' interest; I want it to *induce perplexity*, which is my second criterion for the effectiveness of a stimulus. In philosophy, "we're peering out into the dark and don't yet have a good sense of what we're doing" (Grayling, cited in Edmonds & Warburton, 2012, p. xvii). Accordingly, I look for materials that will intrigue, puzzle and eventually disorient students, leading them to an aporetic impasse. To grapple with doubt and confusion is after all the basic philosophical predicament, and often a precursor to insight and clarity (Worley, 2009).

The Socratic gadfly is a defining image from the annals of Western philosophy. Just as the Athenian people needed the prick of a stinging fly to stir them into life (Plato, *Apology*, trans. 1937, 30e–31a), our students need incisive stimuli that can spur them to rethink their concepts and values. My third criterion for an effective stimulus, then, is that it *challenge intuitions*.

Philosophy thrives on contestation, and students may need some prompting to interrogate their hunches, entertain counter-intuitive positions, examine received wisdom, and stress-test their assumptions. A well-made stimulus offers these prompts.

It is often said that a stimulus for philosophical inquiry should give rise to contestable questions. I go a step further in nominating the power to *ignite controversy* as my fourth criterion for an effective stimulus. That is to say, a good stimulus is deliberately divisive: it elicits disagreement and provokes students to make explicit their various moral or epistemic commitments. Students begin by staking out their respective territories, and in the course of dialogic argument—aided by alternative perspectives—they have the opportunity to moderate or nuance their views. An important function of stimuli in CPIDA, then, is "to create controversies with which children can then think more deeply" (Worley, 2014, p. xxi). To this end, I sometimes choose a stimulus that presents a partisan case, advocating for a particular position, while at other times I choose a dyadic stimulus that presents a counterpoint of pro and con cases. The former encourages students to produce thoughtful rebuttals and counterarguments, while the latter places more emphasis on students' evaluating the arguments given.

Relatedly, my fifth criterion for an effective stimulus is that it *elicit reasoned argument*. As Baker (1996) observes, we often "stride into a discussion with our squads of unexamined opinions innocently at our heels—and, discovering that, yes, we do feel strongly about [the issue], we grab the relevant opinion and, without dress rehearsals, fling it out into audibility […] only to discover, seconds later, its radical inadequacy" (pp. 4–5). Since radically inadequate opinions thrive in the absence of cogent arguments, supporting the careful development and cool-headed evaluation of arguments is an essential function of philosophical inquiry. When examining arguments that students themselves have articulated (or arguments that they have heard their peers voice), the experience is far more compelling than when they encounter mere toy examples of argument that are abstracted or detached from real life. For this reason, I think it is worth developing our philosophical stimuli with the prospect of student-led argumentation in mind.

Examples from my high school workshops

Each of my student workshops addresses a particular philosophical theme and unfolds over a period of one or two hours. During that time I present a series of stimuli, allowing space in between for CPIDA to emerge. In the sections that follow, I offer three detailed examples of how I curate and arrange stimuli in my high school philosophy workshops. The first example illustrates how the five criteria described above are reflected in my choice of stimuli. The second example highlights the utility of a basic pattern I use in workshop design, whereby an initial provocation is followed by one or more complications of the issue in question. The third example demonstrates how a more complex interplay among various stimuli can generate diverse intellectual puzzles for students to grapple with. (Note that deciding the age-appropriateness of any workshop is a matter for the facilitator's discretion, bearing in mind the students' life experiences and emotional maturity.)

Example 1, illustrating the five criteria in practice

Here I draw on the example of 'The Real-Life Truman Show', a workshop on therapeutic deception in the context of dementia care.

I begin the workshop by playing excerpts from a fictional audio drama (Mitchell & McCorry, 2015) that invites students to imagine how it would feel to experience the confusion and temporal disorientation of advanced dementia. This *activates emotions*, helping students to empathise with dementia patients and begin to think about what kind of care would honour their dignity. The fictional story also enlivens the issue of therapeutic deception in the context of dementia care.

Next, I describe some real-life cases in which dementia carers have routinely engaged in deception, for instance "by suggesting that a loved one has visited [the patient] recently, while knowing this to be untrue; by playing a recording of a loved one's voice on a telephone, presenting it as a 'live' conversation; or by stylistically presenting a care home with domestic interiors that are intended to disguise the institutional nature of the setting" (Matthews, 2019). I then *induce perplexity* by raising the central question of the workshop: If allowing dementia patients to continue believing falsehoods promotes their emotional wellbeing, is this a sufficient reason to sacrifice the moral norm of truth-telling? I introduce the concept of epistemic autonomy as a rationale for truth-telling, and I *challenge intuitions* by having students reason together about whether—and under what circumstances—this norm may justifiably be suspended.

Students then watch a short video (excerpted from *World's Untold Stories*, 2013) about Hogewey, a care facility in the Netherlands designed for elderly people with advanced dementia. Hogewey, which employs all-day reminiscence therapy, has been described as

> a gated model village, complete with town square, post office, theatre, hair salon, café-restaurant and supermarket—as well as cameras monitoring residents around the clock, and well-trained staff working incognito […] [for instance] as post-office clerks and supermarket cashiers […] Every detail of this 'fake reality' has been meticulously designed to ensure that the residents can experience life as close to 'normal' as possible (Niker, 2015).

I *ignite controversy* by counterbalancing the video's positive spin on Hogewey with the observation that critics have compared the care facility to *The Truman Show,* a movie in which the protagonist is unaware that he lives on an elaborate film set. Hogewey's director herself draws an analogy to the theatre, in which the nursing care occurs backstage whilst residents on stage feel as though they are leading an ordinary, non-institutionalised life (Moisse, 2012). This acknowledgement that Hogewey generates a fantasy world for its residents is at odds with the denials by other proponents of all-day reminiscence therapy who argue "it is about creating real environments, not these fake environments that we currently have as institutions" (O'Flaherty, as cited in Lehman & Bhole, 2017). I *induce perplexity* by inviting students to explore what constitutes a 'real' environment and why such an environment may be desirable.

The concluding segment of this workshop involves a card-sorting activity in which students compare the Hogewey model to a conventional model of dementia care and assess each model against a range of criteria. This *elicits reasoned argument* as students appraise how truthful and respectful each model of care is, and how each model of care is likely to affect patients' dignity, epistemic autonomy, wellbeing and freedom.

Example 2, illustrating the Provocation-Complication sequence

Let's turn now to 'Stuck in a Loop', a workshop on free will that exemplifies the Provocation-Complication sequence: a basic pattern for juxtaposing stimuli within a workshop. The sequence consists of an initial stimulus that is expected to elicit particular responses from students, followed by another stimulus that motivates more nuanced reflection on those responses.

I begin the workshop with Wooldridge's (1963) account of the maternal behaviour of the Sphex wasp, whose

> elaborately organized and seemingly purposeful routine conveys a convincing flavor of logic and thoughtfulness—until more details are examined […] [T]he wasp's routine is to bring the paralyzed cricket to the burrow [to nourish her unhatched larvae], leave it on the threshold, go inside to see that all is well, emerge, and then drag the cricket in. If, while the wasp is inside making her preliminary inspection, the cricket is moved a few inches away, the wasp, on emerging from the burrow, will bring the cricket back to the threshold, but not inside, and will then repeat the preparatory procedure of entering the burrow to see that everything is all right. If again the cricket is removed a few inches while the wasp is inside, once again the wasp will move the cricket up to the threshold and re-enter the burrow for a final check. The wasp never thinks of pulling the cricket straight in. (Wooldridge, 1963, pp. 82-83)

I then screen a video clip (excerpted from Pumpkinseed valley, 2016) depicting one such field experiment involving countless iterations of the wasp's moving-and-checking routine. Students observe the wasp instinctively following this rigid, invariable, and ultimately senseless behaviour pattern, and consider Millikan's (2004) observation: "The wasp seems not to understand the purpose of its own activity so as to know when that purpose has been accomplished" (p. 169).

The verbal account, video clip and Millikan quote jointly constitute an initial *provocation*. In response, students engage in CPIDA in response to questions including:

‘To what extent are we like the wasp?’ ‘Are we similarly locked into rigid and invariable behaviours?’, ‘Does the existence of instincts, reflexes or automatic behaviours preclude the possibility of free will?’ and ‘Are we automata, or free agents?’ While some students may point to habits, fixations, or obsessive-compulsive disorders as evidence of the rigidity of human thought, most regard our capacities for choice, flexibility and intelligence (among other traits) as evidence of free will.

We are then ready for our second stimulus, or *complication*: an evocative visual image depicting memory loss (Hertzberg, n.d.) accompanied by an audio clip (excerpted from Abumrad & Krulwich, 2019) in which a woman, Christine, recounts her mother’s episode of transient global amnesia (TGA). The audio clip includes an excerpt from a recorded conversation between Christine and her mother, Mary Sue, in the recovery ward. Although Christine varies her conversational responses slightly, Mary Sue unwittingly but persistently returns to the same themes, recurrently using identical turns of phrase. At one point Christine says: “It’s like Groundhog Day in here […] Every two minutes we’re doing a loop […] We have had the same conversation over and over again for the last two and a half hours.”

In light of this stimulus—which complicates matters, as it highlights unexpected similarities between human and wasp behaviour where previously the *differences* were more evident—students are ready to revisit the territory they explored earlier. They investigate questions such as: ‘Does the repetitive verbal behaviour shown by patients with TGA imply that all human behaviour is pre-programmed, even if we don’t realise it?’, ‘Does Mary Sue’s story change your view on the extent to which we humans are like the Sphex wasp, carrying out set routines or automatic sequences of behaviour?’, ‘If all relevant conditions were known, would human behaviour be predictable?’ and ‘Is free will an illusion?’

Example 3, illustrating more complex interplay among stimuli

I want to show in this section how the thoughtful juxtaposition of multiple stimuli enables students to confront complexities beyond what can be achieved with a basic Provocation-Complication sequence. By way of example, I turn to ‘So Entitled’, a workshop concerning rights and legal personhood.

The first segment of the workshop is inspired by the work of Suddendorf (2013). I begin by presenting students with cards, each inscribed with one of 36 putative characteristics of being human. These include cognitive capacities such as forethought, reasoning, moral agency, self-control and self-awareness; social behaviours such as engagement in politics, trade, and a moral community; physiological features such as opposable thumbs, the FOXP2 gene, and the capacity for vocalisation; and a broad variety of other biological, developmental, technological and cultural characteristics. In each of their small groups, students examine a subset of the cards and sort them on a scale indicating *to what extent each characteristic is significant to our entitlement to human rights*. A plenary session follows in which students defend their conclusions. They then investigate which of the characteristics deemed most significant to rights entitlement are shared by non-human animals, and whether the animals that share those characteristics should be awarded the same rights as humans.

Next, students watch three short videos. The first, excerpted from Achbar & Abbott (2004), reveals how corporate executives are able to exploit the legal personhood of

corporations to escape liability for harms caused in the pursuit of profit. The second, excerpted from Freid (2018) describes how New Zealand's Whanganui River, having been long exploited by government and commercial bodies, was finally granted legal personhood status, meaning that the "the law now sees no differentiation between harming the [Whanganui] tribe and harming the river" (Ainge Roy, 2017). The third video, *Animals: Property or persons?* (n.d.) makes an argument for the existence of non-human rights and raises the question of whether certain non-human animals, such as chimpanzees, should be granted legal personhood. After viewing these videos, the students discuss whether legal personhood (and thereby rights) should be granted to non-human entities such as corporations, rivers, and/or chimpanzees. The students further discuss whether rights ought to be granted on the basis of capacities or on the basis of needs; and whether rights should always be accompanied by duties or liabilities. Finally, the students ponder where rights come from, and whether it is contradictory to suppose that rights are both inherent and negotiated by international communities.

The cards and videos used as stimuli throughout the workshop represent intellectual puzzle pieces which the students attempt to fit together. There are points of both congruity and conflict among the ideas that the various stimuli suggest or elicit. For instance, the card- sorting game and the third video on non-human rights hint at the idea that rights should be granted on the basis of capacities (such as the capacities for self-awareness, autonomy, language, culture and planning), whereas the second video concerning the Whanganui river suggests that rights should instead be granted on the basis of needs (such as the need for protection). Additionally, the notion that non-human entities should be granted legal personhood is affirmed by the second and third videos which concern the push for environmental and animal rights, yet this notion is challenged by the first video which concerns the avoidance of corporate liability. Whether rights should always be accompanied by responsibilities is also in contention. To investigate what accountability might mean for non-human persons such as corporations and rivers, students consider case studies such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal and a hypothetical scenario in which the Whanganui river floods its banks, destroying artefacts in a nearby museum. Each stimulus individually raises its own contestable questions, and the stimuli combine in cross-cutting ways to frame a series of deeper controversies.

Conclusion

I have suggested that *unveiling philosophical practice* and *packaging philosophical content* are two aspects of the presentation of philosophy that bear on the education of school students.

I have made a case for unveiling philosophy as a collaborative practice of shared inquiry and dialogic argument. These are social processes that foster thinking skills and dispositions, an evaluativist epistemology, and a range of constructive norms, all of which can help students refine their thinking with beneficial implications both for students' own personal lives and for civic discourse.

I encourage educators involved in designing and curating philosophical stimuli to draw on the rich diversity of available media, to focus on the quality of both the content and its creative expression, and to ensure that the content connects with students' life experiences.

I have suggested five criteria for judging the likely effectiveness of a philosophical stimulus: that it activate emotion, induce perplexity, challenge intuitions, ignite controversy and elicit reasoned argument. The articulation of these criteria, together with my remarks on the arrangement of stimuli in either a Provocation-Complication sequence or as elements in a more complex puzzle will, I hope, be useful to educators whether they are designing new materials or repurposing existing ones.

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www.thephilosophyclub.com.au
Melbourne
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Australia
Email: michellesowey@gmail.com