

Philosophy for Children in Hawai'i: A Community Circle Discussion

Benjamin Lukey

In spite of the many different “flavors” of p4c Hawai'i, one undeviating element involves the creation of a community for intellectually safe philosophical inquiry. The first step in this process is usually an activity in which the participants work together to fashion a “community ball”. It's a process that Thomas Jackson teaches in his PHIL 492 course.

The Community Ball

Lisa Widdison (UH Mānoa philosophy graduate student and p4c facilitator at Hokulani Elementary)

When I took Dr. Thomas Jackson's Philosophy for Children course, he taught us, right at the beginning, how to make a “community ball.” I have to admit, I did not get the purpose at first. I thought it was a sort of an intentional distraction to make us less self-conscious as we answered the three questions that Dr. Jackson asked us. I could not have been more wrong. What I got from the class is that I have become less fearful of being wrong and more concerned about finding out when I might not have it right. The questions we were asked that day could have been any number of different questions. By combining group interaction with the physical creation of a very likable ball of yarn, the class became a community. The yarn changed from a mere thing to a symbolic representation of the community as it was passed along. One student fed it with yarn, another student answered a question, then they passed the growing ball to someone else who fed in more yarn and so on to the next person. The result was that we had collaborated in making the ball. Why is that so special? The community ball has several functions. As it is formed, the community is formed. The community ball activity demonstrates that cooperation among individuals is necessary for the creation of a community. The ball also becomes a means of assigning the power to speak. Whoever has the ball is the one permitted to speak. This does not mean that one has to speak; it means that they can speak if they wish or choose to pass, and in passing choose who is to speak next.

When people visit an upper-elementary or high school p4c Hawai'i classroom, they come away deeply impressed with the level of thought and discourse among the students. The question arises “How are you able to get your students to do this?” Often, the first step, as David Falgout notes, is simply changing the

structure of the classroom into a circle, which shifts the focus toward dialogue and inquiry.

The Community Circle

David Falgout (UH Mānoa philosophy graduate student, HPU lecturer)

I feel it's important to point out that the goals of the teacher are reflected in the structure of the classroom. Put differently, classroom structures reveal much about the implicit aims of educators. Children, as they are habituated into these structures, become implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) aware of these expectations and react accordingly. The typical modern classroom reflects such educational aims as “following directions,” and our students frequently respond to this by assuming that their present life situations have no bearing on the content of education. In other words, the education they receive tells them that their individual interests are to be set aside for the sake of receiving a “one-size-fits-all” education, especially considering contemporary standardized testing approaches. A revision of the classroom structure, however, could remedy this situation significantly because it would simultaneously communicate to students that the teacher is adjusting routines for the students. It is revealing, therefore, to notice the reaction that new students have upon entering a p4c Hawai'i community circle for the first time. At first, many are simply giddy that the classroom offers a break from the traditional models they are familiar with. They are brought into an environment that encourages dialogue and inquiry.

Once in a circle, cultivating an intellectually safe community of inquiry requires time, patience, and a commitment to fundamental practices of talking, listening, and thinking with one another in class. From kindergarten, the groundwork is laid so that by the time children are in 2nd grade, they are already modeling the behavior we would like to see as adults.

Lydia Shigekane (Waikiki Elementary teacher)

In kindergarten, I view p4c principally as a community-building activity. My primary aims in kindergarten p4c are for everyone to feel safe enough to speak, to want to speak, to speak with kindness, and to listen with empathy to others. From the first day of school, our first group activity is to sit in a circle on the floor and introduce ourselves to each other, sharing some simple bits of information. We use a soft stuffed animal (monkey) as the-right-to-speak device, and take turns speaking. There are always a few children who are too shy to talk, and they do, of course, have the right to pass. But even shy children want to be heard, and it doesn't take long before everyone is at least saying, "Hi friends, my name is..." I rejoice when this happens. The first step toward speaking to the group has been taken by all. This is how we start p4c in kindergarten—one simple question, monkey goes around the circle, and everyone has the chance to speak.

Once the habit of sitting in a circle, passing George, and listening attentively (more or less) has been established, I break the class into two groups (random groupings) and begin introducing inquiry into our p4c circle. With only half the class (ten or so students) sitting together in a circle, children get the chance to speak more often and to listen for shorter time durations. Sometimes we start our conversation by reading a story and talking about questions that arise from the story, sometimes we just wonder about things, and sometimes I pose questions related to class or home experiences.

There is never a guarantee that something great will happen during a p4c session, especially in kindergarten, when sitting still and waiting for a turn to speak can be agonizing. Sometimes I find myself acting and feeling like a bad policeman, brutish and cranky, because my only contribution to the community seems to be repeated, stern warnings to restless, inattentive souls. On these occasions I can barely keep track of the muted, interrupted ramblings of a few devoted students who have done their best to keep the conversation moving. Do we, as kindergarten p4c participants consistently "scratch beneath the surface?" No. But we are trying to *spend a little more time than usual* on ideas. And we are practicing being a community that can think together and learn from each other.

Jolyn Ikeda (Waikiki Elementary teacher)

In the p4c circle, students learn to take turns during a discussion. They need to listen to each other. They ask

for clarification (What do you mean by that?). They also learn to disagree without arguing. Before p4c, second grade disagreements were usually a "yes it is"/ "no its not" argument, usually ending with "I'm not your friend any more." With p4c, students realize that there are many different perspectives. Differing points of view are valued and make the discussion more interesting. Students can be heard saying "I disagree because..." or "I agree because..." or "Do you mean...?" They also change their minds based on the discussion. I've had second graders say, "At first I thought..., but now I think..." or "I don't know what to think, my head is spinning (from all the different perspectives)" Wow! Perhaps our world leaders need to sit in a p4c circle.

Val Gee and Whitney Mahoney (Waikiki Elementary teachers)

When we have p4c sessions in our fifth-grade inclusion class, Dr. Jackson joins us and brings along several UH students, which adds even more variety to our truly diverse classroom. For both of us, p4c has become a valuable tool that we have been able to use not only as an avenue for our students to freely express themselves, but also as a means of promoting healthy and positive relationships among each other. It's an opportunity for students and adults to apply real world skills such as listening, sharing ideas, and learning to live together in a diverse society. It is wonderful to witness students of varying needs and abilities listen to others and speak their minds on various student generated topics, such as "Should kids be able to drive?" and "Are ghosts real?"

When teachers see the benefits of cultivating communities of inquiry in their classrooms, they also seek such communities in their professional development. The principal of Waikiki Elementary School, one of p4c Hawai'i's model schools, sees the efficacy of the Community Circle not just among the students, but among the teachers as well.

Bonnie Tabor (Waikiki Elementary principal)

As principal, I have found p4c to be of tremendous benefit to our teachers in their professional development. Our faculty meetings often become p4c circles. Within these forums, teachers challenge themselves to bump up their own thinking skills and delve deeper into the topic of concern. Through the intense process of discussion, a camaraderie develops as all strive together to become increasingly adept and effective critical thinkers whose decisions will

impact the school community positively. This process is enlightening. As teachers develop their own thinking, it has a positive and synergistic impact on everything that happens within the school. Better thinkers yield better teachers who in turn produce more inspired classrooms for our students.

Intellectual Safety

One of the defining features of a p4c Hawai'i community of inquiry is intellectual safety. Commitment to an intellectually safe classroom is a commitment to inclusivity in which all participants are valued. The importance of intellectual safety is highlighted further in classes where students with special needs are included in the classroom community. Students with disabilities often lack confidence in their value as participants and, as a high school special education teacher relates, an intellectually safe p4c classroom can help them realize their value.

Katie Berger (Kailua High School special-education teacher)

The environment of a p4c community is by nature less threatening for students, especially those with disabilities who may be more timid in a general education setting. The classroom is set up so that all students and teachers are together as one community. Teachers take on more of a facilitator role, which in my opinion gives students a sense that whatever they have to offer to the community is just as important as what the teacher may have to offer. I think this moves some of the pressure of being “right” away from the student and gives them an opportunity to say how they feel or add their thoughts on the matter without the possibility of being ridiculed for being “wrong.” The p4c classroom is built upon community, inquiry, and philosophical dialogue. In order for these three things to take place all students must agree on making the class intellectually safe. This means that all community members have the right to their own opinion and everyone has to be heard without judgment.

Students in our English class took this very seriously, and this was important in building a strong community of inquiry. Because students felt safe about participating, the discussions would quickly develop as philosophical conversations and students would “dig deeper” into the topics. All student in the class, disability or not, felt comfortable weighing in. And the more the special education students added to the class discussion, the easier it became for them to raise their hand and take risks answering questions they weren't sure about. The feedback they got from other community

members was positive; the classroom, intellectually safe.

The intellectual safety of a classroom develops gradually. There are many degrees of intellectual safety. As a classroom becomes more intellectually safe, participants are more honest because both the speaker and the listeners know that honest participation requires respect and that there is far less anxiety that one's words may be misunderstood.

Dana Finnegan (Hökūlani Elementary teacher)

“You can tell Ms. Finnegan that you hate her!” That statement out of the mouth of a six-year-old babe was a celebration of the freedom of p4c in our classroom. How could that be a celebration? What p4c has brought to our classroom and our lives is the freedom of real truth, genuine honesty (around adults no less) and the joy that freedom has triggered.

When in a child's life, or anyone's for that matter, can you look directly at someone and know that it is okay to be that honest without dire consequences? All their lives children are taught by adults not to lie, but then we admonish them if their truth is not what we expect it to be. How confusing is that?

Intellectual safety is important for its role in developing a sense of community, but it is also valued for its role in helping students to make progress in their thinking and understanding. A philosophy graduate student explains how intellectual safety came to improve her own thinking.

Ana Laura Funes Mandelstam (UH Mānoa philosophy graduate student)

One of the things that has struck me the most about the philosophy for children program is precisely its capacity to make us think anew about any topic within a safe environment, without having to worry about being wrong or right or original. When I am at a p4c session, I feel my thoughts flowing spontaneously again. They articulate themselves in an original and unique way that happens just because I am allowed to be “me.” The amazing thing is that this uniqueness springs out of the community of inquiry and because of it. This is something that I became aware of as I was working on an essay about Wittgenstein. He says that it is only after having learned language in social interactions that we can start to articulate our “inner language” of thought and not viceversa. I think my visits to Waikīkī Elementary School have helped me to better understand this idea. Having visited p4c sessions mostly with first graders over one semester made me realize

how much our thought is embedded within this social context, and how important it is for the development of our own thoughts to be part of a safe community.

Progress in p4c Hawai'i inquiries

A p4c Hawai'i inquiry is a complex process of social and intellectual interactions. Veteran p4c teachers are attuned to the many ways that students and a class may exhibit progress in and through the inquiry process. Simply being part of an intellectually safe diverse community exposes participants to different ideas and prompts explorations of one's beliefs and those of others. The initial confusion that results from the introduction of new ideas is a sign of progress in our own thinking

Catherine Caine (Waikiki Elementary teacher)

Social learning is at the core of my philosophy as a teacher. I can't emphasize enough that we learn best when we are supported within a safe community that values not only thinking but also social thinking. As a teacher it is imperative that I find systems that enhances my students opportunities to learn in social ways.

In her book *Active Literacy Across the Curriculum*, Heidi Hayes Jacob makes a distinction between true discussions and question-answer sessions. When teachers ask questions it is usually the same students who raise their hands, ready with the answer that the teacher is seeking. No discussion. Jacobs, however, points to the Latin root of the word discussion as "discutere" which means to shake apart. p4c doesn't encourage students to find the one right answer, it creates instead "discutere," a shaking up of thinking, if you will. By engaging in social learning processes students are provided with an opportunity to explore, investigate, respond, and listen to others' thoughts.

When presented with a variety of beliefs and viewpoints, it is important that participants are also equipped with the means to critically examine these beliefs and form further questions that will push the inquiry deeper. The Good Thinker's Tool Kit (GTTK), created by Thomas Jackson, provides participants with a vocabulary and strategies that develop critical thinking skills. Also referred to as WRAITEC¹, the GTTK consists of seven letters that help identify and facilitate processes characteristic of good thinking. These "tools" are often utilized throughout the process of inquiry, the most basic of which is called "Plain Vanilla." Plain Vanilla consists of five stages: 1) Participants read, watch, or listen to a stimulus together as a community; 2) each participant poses a question; 3) the participants then vote on which question they will use to begin the discussion; 4) the discussion/inquiry begins (this stage usually accounts for

the bulk of the time in Plain Vanilla); and 5) they reflect on and/or evaluate the discussion. A Kailua High School teacher who is also a Waikiki Elementary School parent relates a story that reveals how comfortable and competent her children were with the GTTK and how they were able to help her as she began to use these strategies as a teacher. Another Kailua High School teacher relates how comfortable her sophomore students were with the GTTK and how they used WRAITEC to form questions for the classes' first Plain Vanilla.

Kelley Espinda (Kailua High School Japanese Language and Culture teacher)

I am privileged that both of my children have attended Waikiki Elementary School and have participated for several years in the p4c experience with Dr. Jackson. It has helped both my son and daughter develop confidence, and it has improved their problem solving skills and compassion for others. An "aha" moment for me came about when I was brainstorming a lesson plan that included some practice questions for my students. My ten-year-old daughter surprised me, when I asked about the WRAITEC acronym that is one of the strategies that they learn in p4c. She began immediately reciting key words and example questions from a book report she was currently working on in class. I followed up by asking her what she thought about the practice questions I had written down previously. Without a bat of an eye, she exclaimed, "Really, Mom!" I almost caught her rolling her eyes at me. She was unimpressed with my questions and immediately started offering feedback on how I could make my WRAITEC questions better. The WRAITEC tool kit is extremely useful in guiding and creating questions that promote discussion and inquiry.

Jenine Hutsell (Kailua High School English teacher)

On the first day of school I sat in a circle of twenty-seven sophomores, nervously rehearsing how I would explain the community ball to the new students. My sweaty hands fidgeted with the brightly colored yarn. "What is the community ball?" I asked the class, as if I really knew what I was talking about. Instantly, hands shot up and students rang out in reply. I was relieved. Not only did students know how the community ball worked, but they also knew why it was important to the community. I was impressed with the students' confidence in their responses. They had taken the teacher's role, collaboratively explaining the concept of the ball, and I had taken the student's role as an active and supportive listener.

As much as I had learned on the first day, I was still working from bits and pieces, and struggling to pick up the concepts as we rapidly moved through the first semester. Thankfully the students were already familiar with using the Good Thinker's Toolkit and WRAITEC inquiry strategies, which guided the class discussions. Our first Plain Vanilla started about mid-way through the semester. I had put up reading response questions for the students to complete in order to review their reading from the previous day. I thought this would help students prepare for the discussion. As the students completed their responses in their notebooks, I looked over their own WRAITEC questions to make sure they were ready to share. As I read I was impressed with the depth and insightfulness that the students' communicated through their questioning. I looked back at my questions on the board and found them completely unnecessary. I realized that I did not need to give them questions to answer; I just needed to listen to the questions they already wanted to ask. My little reading response questions were killing the authentic curiosity that the students had already developed and were itching to share. That was the last time I gave the questions.

Progress in an inquiry can also be deeply personal. Two teachers at Waikiki Elementary describe the social and academic progress of one of their students as an illustration of the impact of p4c.

Val Gee and Whitney Mahoney (Waikiki Elementary teachers)

We recall one particular student. He was shy and somewhat reserved. He was fond of numbers, history, and drawing, but he rarely raised his hand or talked much in class. His contributions to discussions were usually short, one-word responses like "yes," or "no," or simply "because." As teachers, we wanted to help him to come out of his shell and achieve more of the potential that was in him. After a couple months of school, he revealed in his journal that he has aspirations to be a politician when he grows up. With his dream of one day running for office in an election, we knew that developing communication skills would be vital to pursuing his goals, but we weren't sure how to help him. To our pleasant surprise, he began slowly to emerge from his shell during p4c sessions. The open nature of p4c and the feeling it encourages that it is safe to talk, provided the perfect context for him to improve his communication skills without feeling pressure. Each week he increased the

number of times he raised his hand during p4c, and each time his answers grew in depth and complexity. By the end of the year, he was drawing from his extensive knowledge of historical facts and current events to explain, support, and define his ideas. He gradually gained in confidence as his peers listened attentively to his opinions and began to look to him as a source of historical and factual information. We also saw gains in his writing and personal communication.

Many students find themselves drawn to topics and questions that are familiar from academic philosophy.

Makana Ramos (Kailua High School alumnus)

I enrolled in Honors English trying to make my folks happy, and I didn't know what to expect. I hadn't taken a class from the teacher, Chad Miller, before, but I am very grateful I had the chance because the guy changed my life. I was allowed to speak up in class and share my ideas. This class was like nothing I had experienced before. I thought I had enrolled in an honors English class but luckily I got philosophy instead. The approach Mr. Miller took in his classroom brought everyone out of their shells and right into the action. I took an interest in the topics we discussed. Now, I actually wanted to go to school. I couldn't wait to ponder and question the different ideas that I had walked past so many times in the hallways of life. What is love? What is hate? What is enlightenment? We read book after book, and I found myself really wanting to read. Philosophical discussions fueled my appetite for understanding, and I wouldn't stop until I was satisfied. We would read short stories and discuss them vigorously. Our small class of twelve became a scholarly community like the one in the movies, like *Dangerous Minds*. p4c changed the way I looked at and came to value education. Now I want to spread the word and way to everyone. I believe introducing philosophy into schools nation wide would drastically change the lives of students for the better. Our p4c circle changed me forever and I will be forever grateful.

Ultimately, what teachers often see is all these aspects of progress come together in one classroom. In her reflection on p4c Hawai'i, a Waikiki Elementary School teacher sees personal, social, and philosophical growth interwoven together.

Nannette Ganotisi (Waikiki Elementary teacher)

Sometimes, many times, the topics start off light and fun before going deeper. The holidays always spark an interest

in topics like ghosts, or Halloween, or “Is Santa real?” These topics have a way of going deeper and students wonder if it is or is not fun to be scared. The class usually separates into those who say it is fun to be scared and those who saying it isn’t. These are times with no right or wrong answers.

p4c has really helped some of our students feel comfortable in sharing their emotions. Some have spoken about their parents’ divorce and feel safe enough to share how they feel.

I often start a p4c session with a story, song, or artifact. On one occasion we started with the song “True Colors.” A first grade girl shared that her dad “hides his true colors and that is why mommy and daddy are getting divorced.” Then another first grader shared a story about her dad texting another woman and her mom found it. Details like these make p4c so powerful and even heartbreaking at times. Four girls decided to form a sort of club at recess after learning that each of them came from divorced families. They asked if they could stay inside at recess for their club. It was a short-lived club, but it formed a long-lived friendship. After sharing their stories they wanted to play. Their friendship endured for the rest of the year. When students share stories like this it makes all of the students think more deeply—about their own families, about relationships, and about each other. They learn to empathize, to care about friends and relations, and to cooperate with each other.

What Kids Have to Say

As rewarding as it may be for teachers to be involved with p4c Hawai’i, the real reason they remain committed to p4c is because of their students. The students themselves love p4c, and they understand why it is important that they have the opportunity to take time out of a busy school-day to nurture their community of inquiry.

Matt Lawrence (Waikiki Elementary teacher)

I asked students in my sixth-grade class to answer the question, “If you believe p4c is good for kids, what are your reasons?” Here’s what some of them had to say.

p4c allows us to use our minds and think in different ways. You have to back up your reasons with evidence and examples. That can really help improve your writing skills. While doing a report I think of p4c, and then I use descriptive words on it.

Usually when kids talk they get disrupted, but p4c is a fun way to share questions and ideas about a subject without getting laughed at or criticized. If the topic involves something that you have held

inside yourself, p4c is something that allows you to say it.

In p4c we can express ourselves. We also can talk about things that you have problems with; or you can talk about things to get other things off you mind. When someone is scared about something, in p4c you get to know that other people are feeling the same way as you and then you know that you aren’t alone. There are other people in your class who are may be scared too. Without p4c kids wouldn’t be able to escape what’s going on in their heads.

p4c is a way to communicate with your classmates and get to know them better. You hear other students’ opinions and maybe change yours. When you hear others...it might have a positive effect on you such as understanding more about the topic or getting new ideas.

p4c teaches us how to respect each other’s ideas and everyone’s different perspectives. It also helps me learn how to discipline myself and listen intently to other people’s thoughts instead of just thinking about my own opinions and thinking that MY thinking is the only right way.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ W- What do you mean by?; R – Reasons; A- Assume/Assumptions; I – Infer/Inferences, Implications, If...Then; T – True; E – Examples, Evidence; C – Counterexample