

## The early years of Philosophy in the City: A retrospective dialogue

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### Abstract

Philosophy in the City (or PinC, as it came to be known) is an outreach programme led by student volunteers from the University of Sheffield's Department of Philosophy. It aims to bring philosophy out of the university and into the wider urban community, stimulating young and older minds through events and activities organised with local partners, including schools, charities, and a homeless shelter. Since its inception in 2006, the project has seen hundreds of student volunteers from the university engage in philosophical conversations with thousands of local residents from a wide variety of backgrounds. Sixteen years on, what can we learn from the achievements and shortfalls of this initiative? The present paper is not a systematic review of the project's history, but a retrospective dialogue between the two authors who both participated in its foundation and its early development: Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière was the project's first President and Joshua Forstenzer its third. In the course of this dialogue, they revisit the initial motivations and ambitions undergirding the project, discuss the obstacles faced throughout their respective tenures of leadership, and analyse the evolving mission of the project against the backdrop of historic changes in English higher education which occurred during this period.

### Key words

non-instrumental activity, nondirective teaching, *paideia*, Philosophy in the City, raising aspiration, student society, university outreach

### Introduction

The following is an edited transcription of a conversation between Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière and Joshua Forstenzer about the creation and development of Philosophy in the City, a volunteer outreach scheme at the University of Sheffield in which undergraduate and postgraduate volunteers from the Department Philosophy visit

schools in the city in order to introduce pupils to philosophy by engaging them in philosophical discussion. Occasional footnotes serve as annotations to help the reader glean more fully the content of the discussion.

### **Conversation**

Joshua Forstenzer (JF): How did Philosophy in the City get started?

Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière (AF): I had this idea that I wanted to do some form of social outreach, using philosophical discussion as a platform. But very quickly, a strong group of classmates—yourself included—formed around the project, made it their own, and carried it forward until the present day. In terms of the project's inception, I think I started Philosophy in the City for personal reasons, but I also started it because the context in which I lived at the time allowed and encouraged that kind of initiative. On a personal level, I came to the UK from France as an undergraduate in 2004. I remember feeling enthusiastic about philosophy, about the exchange of ideas. I felt somehow that was empowering. I suppose I had a sense that that was good in and of itself. In secondary school, I had a philosophy teacher who would tell us something, and she said it with quite a bit of pride, which is that philosophy had no use and that was a good thing. It didn't have a clear instrumental utility. I'm not sure I agree with that today, but at the time I was struck by that idea, and it seemed especially important in a context in which there wasn't much space for activities that were non-instrumental. That was in the back of my mind when I started as an undergraduate. And then, when I arrived in Sheffield, I was also struck by the visibility of class divisions in that city. I was shocked at how desolate some areas of the city appeared. So, those were two starting points at a personal level: a naive enthusiasm for philosophy as a non-instrumental activity, and a kind of naive concern about urban poverty. I loved the seminars and the discussions we had as philosophy students. I thought that kind of activity had some kind of intrinsic value. But I was also keenly aware that our position as university students was privileged, especially because, before the introduction of top-up fees in 2006, there was a real sense that our degrees were subsidised by others through general taxation. Philosophy classes for children and teenagers may not seem like the most obvious or useful form of social outreach, but I suppose that was the point. We had the chance to do something that we enjoyed and which, perhaps, did us good. I thought that children in local schools might also enjoy it, if they were given the chance—and that philosophy students were in a good position to make that happen. Also, at the time, there was a feeling that such initiatives were possible. The University of Sheffield's Students' Union was very

active and it had a big volunteering office. And it felt like that was something that you were able to do, like you were encouraged to do. It was an environment in which you were not only able to get involved in something, but you were able to create your own student society. People around me were creating student societies, but kind of random ones. So, for example, I had a friend who made a radical ironing society. And I think this wasn't just him. I think this was kind of a general tendency amongst a lot of students to make societies, almost on a whim.

JF: A radical 'irony' society? Or 'ironing'? What was radical about ironing?

AF: Well, you would take an iron and ironing board and you would iron in unusual places. I suppose it was also meant to be ironic, as well, in the loose sense of the word. But the point is that there were lots of other student societies like that and there was a feeling that we, as students, could try something, experiment. There was a kind of culture within the university, I suppose it was kind of a social entrepreneurship, that you could invest yourself in an idea, absurd or serious, and you could see what came of it. I had this interest in philosophy and a concern about divisions or inequalities within that city. And maybe also I was interested having a way into social worlds where I didn't belong, having an excuse to be there to exchange with someone who would understand that place better than me. So, I went to the head of the Philosophy Department at the time, Bob Stern, and he was very supportive. And then I filled out the forms from the Students' Union, which meant that they covered all the costs for CRB [Criminal Record Background] checks. The process was very streamlined. Again, it felt like if you had an idea, you could very easily just do it. I wanted to go with some of my classmates to talk about philosophy with kids in schools where that sort of thing didn't usually happen. And we did it.

JF: So the University of Sheffield was a propitious context for starting Philosophy in the City. Was there anything else about the context at the time that motivated you?

AF: Yes. This was in the mid-noughties. At the time, the popular culture in England was very concerned about, or at least superficially concerned about, class and about certain forms of social deprivation. And that manifested itself in some ways in a kind of 'moral panic'.<sup>1</sup> So, for example, it was definitely a time in which there was a great

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'moral panic' was coined by the sociologist Stanley Cohen. He explains the phenomenon as follows: 'Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking

deal of people in the media performing concern about teenage pregnancy, trying to understand why teenage girls from working class backgrounds in England had high pregnancy rates. It was also a time when concern around antisocial behaviour and 'chav' culture was very big, at the tail end of New Labour.<sup>2</sup> There was debate around identity cards, CCTV was still a debate, there was still a question about whether we should be constantly recording public spaces. And so, at least that's how I perceived it, all of this was very much tied up with social anxiety about the indigent poor in a post-industrial economy. But why did you get involved?

JF: Well, I joined up because—simply put—you asked me to. We'd met the previous year at the philosophy Reading Weekend in the Peak District. Like you, I was an American who had grown up in France. I had studied for a Baccalaureate where philosophy figured prominently, and I had discovered philosophy in the European sections in French *collège* when I was 13 or 14 years old. So, I immediately understood that philosophy could be of value to young people. But I didn't think of philosophy as being a noble art or of intrinsic value. In the context of Philosophy in the City, I thought philosophy was a good tool through which to dispel confusion and develop self-confidence, critical skills, and self-advocacy among disadvantaged communities. I think I was more bought into the 'raising aspiration' thing than the goal of imparting philosophical wisdom. I also sensed that, in Britain, taking ordinary people intellectually seriously was kind of subversive—and I liked that! But, tell us, how did the project actually get started?

AF: An initial challenge was to get access to schools. I wasn't from Sheffield and I didn't know anyone there. I also wanted to target schools in the east side of the city,

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people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself' (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Remarking on the widespread cultural disdain for working class people evident in British popular culture, the media, and among middle and upper class people, Owen Jones opens his 2011 book, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, with an anecdote in which the following remark is made over dessert in a middle-class household: 'It's sad that Woolworth's is closing. Where will all the chavs buy their Christmas presents?' (Jones 2011, p. 1). He then explains that almost no one in that social setting—however left-leaning—had even noticed the derogatory character of the term 'chav' used to refer to poor people because belief in their cultural inferiority was so widespread in Britain near the end of the first decade of the 2000s that the casual denigration of working-class people in Britain was seen as socially acceptable.

where there were more working class and low-income neighbourhoods. Someone put me in touch with a certain Mrs Bell (I don't remember her first name) who had recently retired as a teacher at Park Hill Academy, which was exactly the kind of school I thought we should be in. Her husband used to be a philosophy professor at Sheffield, so she was a really good interface for us. She picked up the phone and connected us with a teaching assistant, whom we eventually worked with at Park Hill Academy. It was through the teaching assistant that we got access, which is pretty unusual, right? It's unusual that it's through this kind of person, who has maybe the least power in the structure of the school, who kind of gave us the 'in'. Because I don't remember ever sitting down with the head of school.

JF: And what did you do in those early days? Who was involved?

AF: Early on there was a small group of very committed volunteers, some of whom went on to have careers as teachers, like Elaine Yeadon, or as academic philosophers, like James Andow or yourself, or both, like Jane Gatley, who worked for several years as an RE [Religious Education] teacher and then did a PhD in the philosophy of education. The Students' Union paid for taxis to drive us out there because someone or other was afraid we'd get assaulted in that part of town, which probably went against the spirit of the whole thing ... But, still, after a lot of back and forth, we started doing weekly sessions with several classes in the school. There was a rule that no one should be sent in alone. That was important because we didn't want people to feel isolated, and probably also because it was more fun to run a session with a friend. Because it's a form of support, right? In fact, I think I asked you to come up with something like a plan for what we should do because you were older and you were already studying for your Master's degree by then. Most of the rest of us were very young and we certainly didn't have any pedagogical training. Still, everyone was fairly free to write their own 'lesson plans', but a lot of them centred on the sort of thought experiments we would have seen in applied ethics seminars, like the trolley problem<sup>3</sup> or the survival lottery.<sup>4</sup> It was important for me that people who were

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<sup>3</sup> The trolley problem is a thought-experiment, developed by Philippa Foot (1967) and given prominence by Judith Jarvis Thomson (1985), where the agent is driving a moving trolley that cannot be stopped and is set to cause the certain death of five people on the track ahead, but the agent can choose to switch the track on which the trolley dashes forward to another track where only one person would be sure to be killed. The thought-experiment invites us to consider whether switching tracks would be morally forbidden, permissible, or required.

<sup>4</sup> The survival lottery is a thought-experiment, developed by John Harris (1975), where the agent is supposed to operate in a world in which organ transplant has been perfected to the point of never failing and has to decide whether it would be morally forbidden, permissible, or required to kill one perfectly healthy person with just the right organs such as to save two ailing and soon to be dead

teaching felt a certain kind of ownership and autonomy over what they were doing. Like, I didn't want to tell them this is the lesson plan, this is what you should be doing.

JF: And in fact people designed very different classes. Some came with mini-lectures. Others prepared for seminar style-discussions. I was very keen on open-ended discussions in response to a philosophical spike. But I remember that Elaine [Yeadon] went in with sheets of papers written with words like 'virtue', 'wealth', 'health', 'beauty', 'truth'. And she asked the pupils to sort them in order of importance. It led to discussions between pupils to figure out what they thought the order of the goods should be. And I thought it was really pedagogically innovative. I was really impressed with that. I remember thinking: 'Wow, That's really cool!'

AF: What about the atmosphere in the classes? Do you remember how the kids were?

JF: Mostly, it went really well. They were engaged and engaging. For me, it was really important that the pupils get the sense that they could shape the discussion and make the lesson follow their own sense of curiosity and interests. So, my experience was that we were rarely overly didactic. And that kept the kids talking and interested. It could be a bit loud at times, compared with a more traditional school learning environment. But above all, I remember it as being really fun for the pupils and for us.

AF: I don't think the pupils ever really acted up. What do you remember?

JF: I agree. Behaviour-wise, nothing terrible ever happened. But the teachers had warned us that it was a very difficult group of kids. I remember one of the teachers telling me that a couple of the kids who were the most talkative were actually just out of juvenile detention. And, you know, there was a sense that the teacher's expectation was that these kids would end up back in contact with the criminal justice system before long. So the teachers were amazed that the challenging kids had spoken to us so willingly, because most of the time those kids were kind of angry about being in school. But, on the other hand, some of the teachers were fretful about the fact that philosophy opened the space to asking very openly what morality demands. One teacher told me that she was actually worried about telling these particular kids that morality is a matter of debate since opening up what's morally right for discussion might lead to them behaving poorly. And I remember finding that hard to understand, at first. I remember really having a feeling of like, 'Yeah, but if they don't think about

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patients. Both the trolley problem and the survival lottery are typically used pedagogically to investigate and question the distinction between killing and letting die, as well as the moral import of special relationships and impartiality.

it all, what makes you believe that just telling them over and over again what's right or wrong is going to make them do the right thing? You know, they still might not do it ...' My sense was that if moral behaviour is already a problem, maybe thinking about morality explicitly is better than not thinking about it all—especially when these kids knew very well that the society they lived in was full of injustice. In fact, as I recall, there was a particular session—I believe we were discussing a variant of the trolley problem—where a teacher stopped the session, interrupting the debate, by saying 'No, we're not discussing this'. And at some point, she just said to the kids that what they were saying—which was something to the effect that they would save their friends and family if they were on the track, but no one else—was just morally wrong, that it was not a debate and that some things are just wrong. I didn't disagree with her about the robustness of morality, but I remember finding that difficult because, pedagogically, the aim was to foster debate ...

AF: Yeah, there were times where it felt like the teachers were not on board with philosophy as a mode of discussion. And in fact we weren't invited back to that school later on. But, at the same time, it's probably the case that some of those teachers knew things about the kids, had insight, that we didn't realise. Maybe some of the topics, which were miles away from our lived reality, were much more real for some of the children in the classroom. And the teacher needed to manage that.

JF: Yeah, no doubt, they knew a lot more than we did about what was going on for the kids and what they might need. Which is why, in fact, we just accepted to follow the teachers' lead in those situations. But you said that we weren't invited back to that school. So where did the project go after that first year?

AF: I don't think that there was any falling out with the Park Hill Academy. The relationship just fizzled. Maybe there was a change in leadership there. But that first year proved that this could be done and we created partnerships with other schools: King Edward VII, which was a really strong comprehensive, Silverdale, and the City School, where half the students had Special Educational Needs and nearly one in five qualified for free school meals. So that was exciting, even if some of those schools didn't correspond to our original outreach intent. The project developed, and we even organised a mini conference on campus for pupils from local schools. But that's also the point at which I graduated and left Sheffield.

JF: Ah! That's right. You left us for the allure of studying in Paris for a while ...

AF: But you stayed on during your PhD, and really developed the project. So how was that? What happened during those following years?

JF: So, I took over the presidency of Philosophy in the City in late October 2008. I suppose I had not originally intended to take on a leadership role within the project ... The previous year, I had started my PhD and I was keen to become an academic philosopher, so I didn't naturally see PinC as a priority in my life at first. But in September-October of 2008 there had been a danger of the project falling apart and it looked as though I could lend a helping hand. I had also started reading a lot of John Dewey at that point, so I was inspired to try to do something that matched my philosophical commitments. And I reckon I was also inspired by two wider cultural realities: The West Wing television show and the Obama campaign in America. As corny as it sounds, I kind of caught the 'Yes we can!' bug and PinC needed help, so I thought I'd try my hand at leading it. It is no exaggeration to say that that decision changed my life. It led me to take on more and more civic and political responsibilities, and to discover a whole new world of philosophical practice—especially Matthew Lipman's 'Philosophy for Children'. But at that point, when I came into the role, the project was having some trouble with getting the sessions in schools going again in part, I think, because of your absence. Once the leader with the strong vision was gone, there was a wobble ...

AF: But also some other core people had gone, right?

JF: That's right. A lot of people who had been really active had graduated over the summer. So we kind of had to reinvent a project really in terms of the people, even though we knew what we wanted to do and we had some connections with some schools. And in fact, more schools had been in touch over the summer—that was the positive: the word had gotten out. So schools were emailing the Philosophy in the City email. So there was an appetite, but we hadn't really figured out how to renew the pool of volunteers and keep the momentum going.

AF: So what did you do at that point?

JF: Well, the very first thing we did was to run a volunteer drive and then we devised a plan to actually train the volunteers. As far as I can recall, that was the first time we'd actually ever run a non-safeguarding training. But because we had lessons and experience from the previous two years, we actually developed a pedagogic training that was based mostly on things we'd already done. It was kind of like 'here's what we've done, here is how we hope things will go, and here is how you might be able to



get involved if it sounds good to you'. As I mentioned before, I think that for me it was really important that the way we were conceiving of what philosophy was at least gave a significant proportion of time and energy to young people getting an actual chance to think and speak for themselves about the topics.

AF: Do you mean for the volunteers or the school pupils?

JF: Well, both. But I think my own pedagogic sense of vocation told me that the pupils' voices needed to be at the heart of what happened in the lessons. I think that was really important to me. It's part of what I kind of thought I was bringing to the project when I took up its leadership. It's what I felt I had a bit of a mandate to do, to cement a pedagogically open model as the way in which we were going to do philosophy in schools. Put otherwise, I thought that it was important that we all knew that we were not going to be primarily didactic educators.

AF: So did you adopt an entirely nondirective model of education, where free floating conversation ruled everything?

JF: No, not really. I think the pedagogic thrust aimed to balance content delivery and discussion, with an emphasis on pupils taking a greater part in the discussion than us. In the previous two years of the project, we had made some efforts at some didactic content delivery, and we made some efforts at also organising discussions around that content. So the next natural step for me was to look for a balance and I think I still was an advocate of balance at that time. But I think it was really important that we never thought of ourselves as just doing a purely didactic intervention. After all, we were not trained teachers.

AF: So, no one intervention should ever be just didactic?

JF: Yes, that was the baseline. And I think that was really important to me both educationally and kind of organisationally. I really felt like that would make it more possible for the project to exist over time, because requiring people to do content delivery is intimidating and just not that exciting. And also schools were not that interested in us presenting ourselves as substitute teachers. Truth be told, they just weren't that interested in undergraduate students coming and doing content delivery that their own teachers could do. The schools' sense was that it is not what is really interesting about having undergraduate students in the classroom. What's interesting is having a context in which their own students could feel capable of being in

conversation with undergraduate students who are further down the road in their education and in philosophy.

AF: So was that what you focused on in the first pedagogical training?

JF: Yes. I think we asked ourselves: How do we empower volunteers to come up with new materials and spark conversations? How do we focus on enabling the conversation rather than particularly trying to teach the pupils distinctly philosophical content?

AF: And did it go well?

JF: Yes, I think that worked pretty well, in so far as we recruited, I guess from the top of my head, around 35 volunteers that autumn semester. So that was quite a big shift in numbers—I think we had perhaps been 10 or 15 at the high point in the previous two years. And I think we fully trained 20 of our new volunteers, as I don't think all 35 showed up to the pedagogical training, although all of them had CRB clearance. So at that point we had a bigger contingent of engaged volunteers. And that allowed us to expand the size of the project and we created a more formal committee. I think in previous years you [AF] would call meetings of all the people who were involved in the project and, in essence, that would kind of be the committee. But once we had a lot more people, it didn't make sense for all of them to show up to all of the meetings. So we developed a structure, which at that point was largely happenstance, sort of a natural response to what was going on. In that structure, I was the President, Graham Priestley—who is now a Lecturer in Philosophy at Leeds—was the Vice President, and Dominika Vetter was the Secretary. And then we had a 'link' for every school, like any individual volunteer who wanted to become a link would be allocated to a specific school and they oversaw the activities taking place in that school. And then that link would recruit volunteers from the wider volunteer pool for specific openings to ensure that people would come to that school to cover the sessions.

AF: I feel like the role of the link is something that we had already established—at least in my second year as President ... Or at least, you had kind of the people doing that in practice.

JF: Yes, that sounds right. In fact, I think the links had been allocated or selected in late spring for the autumn. But, as I remember, one of the problems was that the new links were not entirely sure about what they were supposed to do. I think the handover hadn't been very formalised at that point. Neither were the role

descriptions. This resulted in links not necessarily taking responsibility to liaise with their allocated school. So much so that there was a real risk that nothing would happen. So reinvigorating the links and establishing some ground rules and job roles became a pressing need.

AF: How did that become clear?

JF: Well, there had been a few schools that had tried to make contact with their links but had received no reply. Eventually, some of the school teachers contacted the Philosophy Department. So that's when I became aware of the fact that something was amiss. I thought we should empower the links to establish their own bespoke relationship with each school but that they should also be accountable for making sure that the relationship was maintained. I had at the front of my mind the fact that we had lost the connection with Park Hill by then. So each school was precious.

AF: And did it work?

JF: It felt a bit like reinventing the wheel, at first. That was part of the experience, we had to ask: How can we do this again but without going through the same kind of trials and tribulations as we've been through in the last two years? How can we use what we have learned and put the project on a solid footing? Once we had the pedagogical training in place and we also had a training for the links we kind of had spent more time with the links in particular talking about how to deal with teachers and how to maintain relationships with the schools, things took off really fast. And, in fact, I think we ended up working with five schools. As I remember it, the main school that was the big supporter of the project that really worked with us very enthusiastically to keep it going was Silverdale, which the project and the Department still has very close links with to this day. We also worked with King Edward, King Egbert, Longley Park and Tapton. This was all at the secondary level.

AF: And did you personally do anything to foster those relationships?

JF: I felt like I had to learn what the teachers needed and wanted, so I met with them regularly. I saw the teachers as the main gatekeepers, and I thought that we had to work with them to keep the project going to make sure we still had access to schools. This was really beneficial to me, as I learned about what they hoped for and needed from us. So when we ran the summer school again in 2009, we got a decent turnout—around 80 pupils, I think. And we held a teachers' meeting with the head of the Philosophy Department and some members of the committee. Paul Moore-Bridger

from Silverdale was particularly vocal and he had ideas about how we could do more work to help disadvantaged pupils come to university.

AF: So that was still a goal for the project at that point?

JF: Absolutely! But we weren't sure how to do it. That was the era of the 'Milburn Report' about raising aspirations and we hoped to do our part.<sup>5</sup> But it wasn't clear that doing philosophy was in itself helpful. So, Paul Moore-Bridger [who now leads the UK Association for Philosophy Teachers] suggested that we should give targeted homework support to pupils who needed help to get better grades at A-Level or at GCSE, as those were stopping some pupils from going further in their studies. This meant helping with different subjects, not just philosophy. So I then pitched this to my committee, asking if this was something they wanted us to be involved in and it was pretty much split. Some committee members felt very strongly that we ought not go beyond doing philosophy as Philosophy in the City.

AF: So this was something of a turning point, maybe reckoning with a tension that had been present from the start: Was the project mainly about bringing philosophy outside of the academy, or was it about encouraging and creating pathways for pupils from non-traditional backgrounds to come into the academy? I don't think those two goals are mutually exclusive, but maybe PinC needed to choose its priorities in order to know where to invest its limited resources ...

JF: Maybe ... I personally felt as though we could do both within PinC. So that really did put me in a strange situation because I was the President of Philosophy in the City and I had just basically been told by the majority of my committee that they didn't want to do what I thought we should do. So my next move was to propose to the committee that we create a brand new project through Sheffield Volunteering, on the same model as Philosophy in the City, but dedicated to doing just this kind of homework support work to help disadvantaged young people in the city get to university. And, honestly, I was surprised because even people who didn't think PinC should do it got involved as volunteers in the new project! I worked on the project

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<sup>5</sup> The 'Milburn Report' was the colloquial name given to 'Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions'. This panel was established by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown in January 2009 and chaired by then Member of Parliament Alan Milburn. Its final report made a series of recommendations designed to improve social mobility, including number 37: 'All universities should work with schools to ensure that higher education related information, advice and guidance, and outreach and mentoring programmes are provided from primary school level onwards' (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, p. 148).

over the summer of 2009 and we launched in the autumn, calling the new project 'Rising Stars' (see Anderson 2009).

AF: So was Rising Stars basically the same people as PinC but doing something else?

JF: Well, not quite. Paul Moore-Bridger had introduced me to two local pupils who were just at the point of finishing their A-levels. One of them was Abdi-Aziz Suleiman and the other one was Abdul Rahman Jama. They were both Somali-British kids who'd come to Sheffield as refugees and had grown up in Broomhall. They were keen to help with Rising Stars. That turned out to be really helpful as they had links into the local community that we did not. In partnership with Silverdale, we organised for university volunteers to mentor approximately 20 pupils who spoke English as a Second Language in anticipation of sitting their GCSEs. The goal was to help them get at least a C in English as that would allow them to pursue their studies at A-Level. As I recall, most of them did eventually get their C in English.

The next year, Abdi [Suleiman], who had become a philosophy student at Sheffield University, took over the leadership of Rising Stars. It began to focus more on helping people prepare their documents for UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admission Service] applications and talking to teachers on behalf of applicants about predicted grades and so on. Rising Stars ran for a few years, but it ended when Abdi was elected the Student Union President in 2012 and no one could really follow in his footsteps, as Abdul [Jama] had gone to study at Oxford.

AF: And what happened to Philosophy in the City?

JF: Well, I personally stepped down from the presidency of PinC in February 2010 to run for Student Union President. My campaign—which was ultimately successful—was largely about doing more work like PinC and Rising Stars, but on a grander scale to really help with widening participation at Sheffield. But before I stepped down I had made sure to draft PinC's first constitution which mostly laid out the responsibilities of the various roles and how people would be elected to them. So, there was an election to replace me. Roy Clutterbuck and Tom Bobbin were elected as co-Presidents. They then launched a new and impressive A-level philosophy mentoring scheme at Longley Park, in Firth Park, a really disadvantaged part of Sheffield. So, in a sense they had finally been able to accomplish the dream I think we had both had at the beginning of Philosophy in the City of combining philosophy with helping people gain access to university who wouldn't otherwise get to go. I remember feeling very proud of them!

AF: Beyond 2010 do you know what happened?

JF: Well, more or less ... As my roles in the University of Sheffield changed, I floated in and out of the project's orbit. But I know that Benedict Arscott, whom I think was President after Roy [Clutterbuck] and Tom [Bobbin], really championed working with the Roundabout charity which helps homeless people in Sheffield. I also know that Ben [Arscott] got really involved in encouraging other departments to adopt a similar model to Philosophy in the City. I think there was a History in the City and maybe an English in the City at Sheffield for a while. And he eventually gave a paper in the US sharing his experiences (see Stone 2011). Later, there was a connection with an anti-isolation centre for the elderly. And then I know that Deacon Robinson and Jane Gatley came to launch international philosophy conferences with PinC out in Worksop, I think.

AF: And did we ever work in primary schools?

JF: Yes, we did, for a while at least. I am not entirely sure which ones. But I know that we had begun a relationship with SAPERE [Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education, a national charity for Philosophy for Children] in 2009, through Hellen Griffin at DECSY [Development Education Centre South Yorkshire], whereby our volunteers would get trained in Lipman-style P4C [Philosophy for Children] in exchange for supporting primary school teachers to use the method (for a pedagogical introduction to P4C, see Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan 1980). The project also worked with Grace Lockrobin's charity Thinking Space and with Peter and Emma Worley's Philosophy Foundation. And now Fufy Demissie from Sheffield Hallam provides a yearly P4C training to PinC volunteers. I know that in 2019-2020, under Emily Wright's leadership, PinC worked with Clifford All Saints' and Woodhouse West (see Wright 2020). I know that the pandemic then put a hitch in things, making it challenging to continually engage with schools, but Michaela Weberova—who was the Chair in 2021-22—worked really hard to renew connections.

But, on a more general level, the Philosophy Department and Philosophy in the City are now connected to other local actors in the field of philosophy for and with children through an umbrella organisation called 'Think Together Sheffield'.<sup>6</sup> So, the wider

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<sup>6</sup> See *Think Together Sheffield* project website: <https://www.thinktogethersheffield.org/>

project of philosophy becoming accessible to everyone in Sheffield is still very much alive and kicking!

AF: And what about the summer schools? Do they still run?

JF: They do! But as 'the Examined Life' (see Stone 2012) which Ben [Arscott] designed as a multi-day philosophy extravaganza and is now integrated into the teaching of the Philosophy Department as part of a Philosophy of Education module, which was originally developed by Natasha McKeever—another one of our volunteers who became a Philosophy Lecturer, now at Leeds. So, now instead of specifically PinC volunteers, it is second year philosophy students who do the teaching, but many of them are also PinC volunteers. In recent year, I have regularly been asked to lead that module.

AF: Looking back, what did this all mean to you?

JF: Well, first it was tremendously enriching for me as an educator and as a leader. I think I discovered the kind of teacher I wanted to be by being involved in the project. I also realised that I could be a change-maker and an advocate for people. But also it taught me that I could be a part of something good, follow someone I believed in, and work towards stabilising the project and making it sustainable over time. I am proud of having been a part of this. And I am proud that it is still running as a student-led organisation 16 years hence!

AF: But do you think it was a worthwhile educational intervention, all things considered?

JF: Yes, of course! Part of the reason I think it is worthwhile is because it keeps happening. This continued interest in these kinds of university student-to-pupil interactions around philosophical discussions demonstrate that it is a valuable activity. But more fundamentally, doing philosophy is different from learning about philosophy. They're related, but they're not the same thing. And I think doing philosophy is more important than learning about philosophy. I think learning about philosophy is really nice. I think it's valuable in lots of ways, but I think doing philosophy is something that we have a common stake in because reason-giving is a widespread human practice that we all value. And I think young people, kids in particular, are extraordinarily willing and able to engage in it. And they benefit from it. And they think better at the end of it. They are more creative, more open, and more critical as a result of doing philosophy.

AF: But are you sure it wasn't just self-indulgent of us?

JF: Well, the project itself became a bit of a model of community-outreach in Sheffield—even playing a part in the University of Sheffield winning the Times Higher Education 'University of the Year' award in 2011.<sup>7</sup>

And the things that came from the project were also clearly valuable. I never held the view you did back then of philosophy as a noble art, or as something that is good in and of itself. So, as a philosophical pragmatist, I always wondered about how this kind of activity was concretely of benefit to all participants. I suppose I came to believe that, for the volunteers, it is an obviously developmental experience: you grow, you think about how to communicate, how to work with others, how to create new experiences that are hopefully valuable, and you figure out who you are or who you want to be in doing so. For the pupils that get to do some philosophy, I think that they learned to take their own voices more seriously, they also learned to listen to one another, to imagine more freely, and to have the confidence to stake a claim, give reasons, and change their minds. A small number of them might fall in love with philosophy, but I think everyone can benefit from experiencing that they have valuable thoughts that are of interest to others and that thinking together is a valuable and fun activity.

For me, the practice of engaging in meaningful conversation with people across lines of enduring difference and enabling people to feel more comfortable and confident in engaging with one another, honestly and openly sharing their thoughts and feelings about complicated questions that they have an interest in talking about, is just one of the most beautiful things that I have ever been a part of. It is humbling and it is deeply educational. It is a form of what Cornel West calls *paideia*—deep character education.<sup>8</sup> It aims at transformation. It is risky. It makes us individually feel vulnerable, but we

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<sup>7</sup> See *Philosophy in the City* project website: <https://sites.google.com/view/philosophyinthecity>

<sup>8</sup> Speaking at a regional Leadership and Social Justice Conference, hosted at Saint Mary's College of California, West (2015,) explains that *paideia* asks the following of us: 'Are you willing to learn how to die, in order to learn how to live? Are you willing to die so that you can be an exemplary figure who has a foretaste of freedom and knowledge of who you are in your struggle for freedom, vis-à-vis the new Jim Crow, wealth, income, and economy inequality? For the last 40 years, I've welcomed students on the first day; I say, "You've come here to die." They say, "I thought I came here for a B+." I've been blessed to teach in prison for 37 years. I just finish a class with 150 brothers. We read Plato. We read Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. We read Toni Morrison. I told the Brothers, "You've come here to learn how to die." When you examine certain assumptions and presuppositions, and when you begin to give some of them up, it is a form of death. There is no rebirth without death. There is no development and maturation without death, and if you're not willing to critically examine who you are and allow something inside of you to die, then you're not ever going to be [a] freedom fighter.' (p. 3)



learn to be strong together through dialogue. It involves our whole selves. And facilitators and learners all co-produce a space of communal learning. I believe it to be the most powerful learning experience I've ever been involved in. I also rather suspect it is the closest thing to an instantiation of what Dewey called 'democracy as a way of life'—deliberative, horizontal, problem solving communities.<sup>9</sup> What doing philosophy with others, as co-inquirers, does for us all is that it teaches us that we are all the source of potential insights, that our thoughts and feelings matter, that—in short—we too can participate in the conversation of humankind with itself.

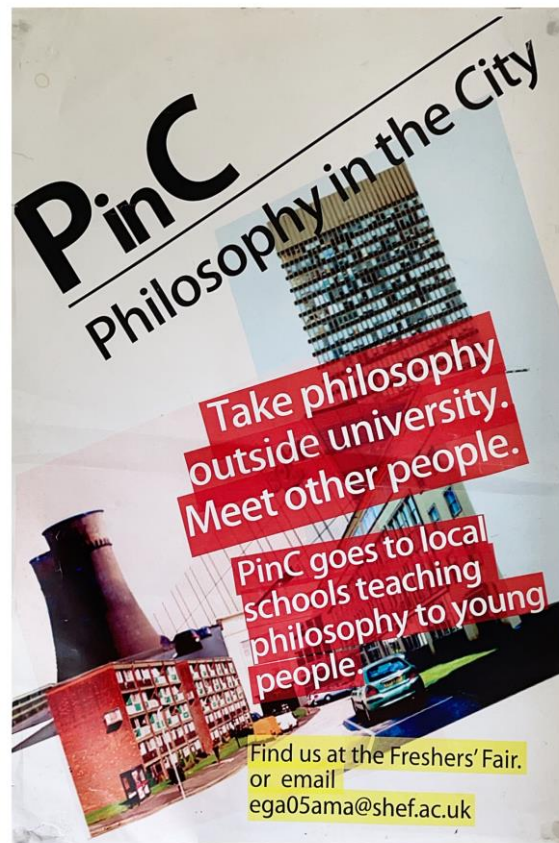
Philosophy, before it was ever written down, was spoken and lived. I think there is tremendous value in realising that wisdom can come from anywhere, that dialogue is something we can practise and perfect, and that we are all able to help one another make intellectual progress. That is why I still use many of the pedagogical methods that I learned from doing this kind of work, and it is also why I still do philosophy in the community when the opportunity presents itself.



**Figure 1:** Recruitment material published by the University of Sheffield, based on PinC activities.

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<sup>9</sup> In Dewey's famous *Creative democracy: The task before us* (2008/1939), he explains: 'A genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other—a suppression which is none the less one of violence when it takes place by psychological means of ridicule, abuse, intimidation, instead of by overt imprisonment or in concentration camps. To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life' (p. 228).



**Figure 2:** Poster for PinC, designed by Ben Dunmore and Alistair Hiscock (two design-oriented early volunteers for Philosophy in the City).

### **Authors' biographical note**

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an undergraduate and completed postgraduate studies (MA and PhD) at the University of Sheffield. More recently, he was the Vice-Chancellor's Fellow for the Public Benefit of Higher Education at Sheffield, Philosopher-in-Residence for MEP Magid Magid at the European Parliament, and a founding member of Think Together Sheffield.

Both authors are Franco-Americans who studied for their baccalaureates in France, where philosophy is a compulsory subject in the final year of schooling. They met as undergraduate students at the Philosophy Department's Reading Weekend in the Peak District.

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