Communication Discourse and Cyberspace
Challenges to Philosophy for Children

Dr. Arie Kizel

Abstract

Teachers and students involved in Philosophy for Children are exposed today to two opposing forms of discourse—communication discourse and education discourse. This article pointed out the central differences between these two discourses and addresses the principal challenges the P4C faces in light of the multi-channel communication environment that threatens to undermine the philosophical enterprise as a whole and P4C in particular. The article seeks to answer questions like what status does P4C hold as promoting a community of inquiry in an era in which school finds itself in growing competition with a communication discourse and should P4C educators espouse the communication discourse or create a counter-discourse?

Introduction

This article addresses the principal challenges the philosophy for children (P4C) educator/practitioner faces today, particularly in light of the multi-channel communication environment that threatens to undermine the philosophical enterprise as a whole and P4C in particular. It seeks to answer the following questions: a) What status does P4C hold as promoting a community of inquiry in an era in which the school discourse finds itself in growing competition with a communication discourse driven by traditional media tools?; b) What philosophical challenges face P4C educators and children in consequence of the new "subject" created by cyberspace? c) Can proper and beneficial use be made of the media in constructing a sense of relevancy and actuality within the classroom?; d) Should P4C educators espouse the communication discourse or create a counter-discourse?

P4C between the school and communication discourse

Over the past years, the school educational discourse within which P4C customarily operates has been increasingly challenged by the communication discourse—also known as "traditional media" (essentially of the multi-channel television type)—which is characterized by mass communication. The essential differences between these two discourses in the way they regard themselves, the way they are viewed by others, and the way they perceive one another have brought them into virtually inescapable conflict with one another. The primary discrepancy between them lies in the contrasting definitions of their goals/function—together with the historical developments in the educational role and the transformation of the media.

The national school education system - governed by the State - views itself as dedicated to creating a subject, granting legitimacy to foundational myths, and transmitting a meta-narrative, memory, and history that champions and promotes effective collective action. The various elements of the mass media, on the other hand, regard their task as reporting, surveying, criticizing, exposing, interpreting, inspiring, entertaining, and determining the public agenda.

I would like to suggest twelve elements that divide these two central forms of socialization and place them in ineluctable conflict.

1. Hegemony vs. anti-hegemony

The mass media is instrumental in form, regarding itself as anti-hegemonic and seeking to oppose the obvious and self-evident even while being in control of its generation and daily reproduction. By definition anti-Establishment, it attempts to exaggerate reality by employing sensationalist means to draw the communication-consuming public's attention, titillate it, and arouse it to action.

In contrast, the educational system is essentially hegemonic, dedicated to creating a consensual hermeneutic institutional space. Schools view themselves as emancipatory, even though—and particularly within the normative educational framework—they frequently act as oppressors and wielders of symbolic violence.

2. Immediate/task-oriented vs. processive

Perceiving itself to be task-oriented, the media is dedicated to producing "here and now" reports that are brief, vocal, and dramatic in nature. The media usually has "no time for" (in both sense of the phrase) in-depth analysis of processes, the superficial range of knowledge it transmits

Dr. Arie Kizel is a senior member at the faculty of education, Haifa University (Israel). He is the head of B.A. studies and programs for teacher education in Haifa University. His research interests include narrative research of social groups, philosophy of education, philosophy with children and research of curriculum and textbooks. Dr. Kizel is the academic head of the Israeli-German commission for textbooks research.

being of a stereotypical form that reinforces its commitment to immediacy.

The education system, in distinction, is devoted to processes, highlighting complexity and profundity over the simplistic—its broad and multifaceted hierarchic structure causing its response-time to be long and slow. This cumbersomeness impairs its image as presented in and by the media.

3. Negativity vs. positivity

The media customarily reports bad news while substantially exaggerating the events. The negative factors in the "journalistic story"—which, according to its own claims, depicts "life"—constitute the oxygen of the communication world. While it exhibits postmodern features in celebrating narratival multiplicity, it actually promotes a single narrative—the "truth," as it were. In this sense, it is a modern phenomenon.

The education system, on the other hand, focuses on the positive rather than the negative. Schools thus view themselves, for example, as representing the ideals of human progress, enlightenment, and liberation from the shackles of religion, representing themselves as the bastion of non-violence, good interpersonal communication, and optimism with regard to the development of the human race. Many schools even endeavor to keep negative ideas out of their realm, attempting to delegitimize them.

4. Individual vs. public

The media is generally controlled by influential individuals operating within a free and competitive market, its private nature making it subject to global capitalist market trends rather than public interest and ethics. The journalistic-facts industry and entertainment material serve as a commercial tool, functioning as currency for the trader.

The education system, in contrast, is largely still public and State-run—particularly where elementary schools are concerned. Despite being increasingly permeated by market-economy interests, they are designed to be impervious to the competitive spirit.

5. Ratings vs. anti-rating

The media revolves around circulation numbers and rating levels. It is not only nourished by ratings but also promotes these via funding—as well as goods, values, and money possessed of a life-preserving mechanism and socio-cultural generative force. It likewise seeks to persuade communication consumers—teachers, parents, and students—to believe that the ratings culture is the right and proper culture. Under the guise of "If you didn't want to watch, you wouldn't," it presents itself in terms of free choice.

The education system, on the other, is by very definition opposed to the ratings culture, regarding itself as bearing a leadership and emancipatory role—in the modern sense—and seeking multicultural goals. Misinterpreting the clash between the media and the education system, parents frequently appeal to political and local-education-authority sources to introduce the ratings culture into schools on the grounds of cultivating competitiveness and transparency.

6. Salesperson vs. educator

The media is engaged in the vending of knowledge, products, and entertainment, the economic goal it espouses being that of the commercial market rather than—and in opposition to—national or ideological purposes. It is, in fact, threatened by national goals—most of all by value-oriented ones, to which it exhibits no commitment whatsoever. The media's central commercial tenet is to sell—the more the better, at high economic prices and low value-related ones.

The education system, on the other hand, perceives itself as serving an intrinsically ideological vision—a worthy *telos* that can enhance the individual, "worthy person," or the "general good." Schools thus seek to bequeath education by transmitting it from generation to generation and making it as up-to-date as possible.

7. Free vs. restricted

The media operates in a virtually unrestricted environment. Although it is subject to laws and regulations, it possesses relative liberty of choice with respect to its content and the determination of the public agenda and trends.

In contrast, the educational system is confined to a severely-restricted context subject to national laws infused with political overtones and conservative ideology. Schools also suffer from numerous constraints because they deal with children and adolescents—i.e., from regulations intended to protect youth from harm. Parental involvement of parents and school intervention further limits their freedom.

8. Exposure vs. discreteness

The media's role is to expose flaws and criticize the authorities—including the education system. It performs this function on the basis of its public commitment, media exposure frequently being accompanied by an invasion of privacy under the principle of "the public right to know," the "journalistic duty to report," or the right of freedom of expression.

The education system, in distinction, is obligated to discretion and protecting minors—including student rights and privacy. Schools are therefore governed first and foremost by concern for the students—many of whom come from difficult homes and have special needs. These factors frequently prevent schools from collaborating with the media.

9. General vs. particular

The media attempts to be as general and broad as possible, addressing public issues and representing the general populace. Its business lies in creating communication ideals—one of its most significant values and tools for the strengthening of the communication "item" and its placement on the public agenda—even at the price of exaggeration or sensationalism—being inclusion.

The education system, in contrast, is devoted to individuals and the task of addressing particular and private issues in detail. Attention to the education and advancement of the individual student—according to specific values—demands the avoidance of the use of generalizations and stereotypes by students and teachers alike.

10. Aggression vs. protection

The media plays a conspicuous role in the democratic game, serving as a restraining and balancing factor amongst the various governmental authorities and creating a public agenda based on considerations. This function frequently makes the media appear aggressive and out to curtail excessive governmental power.

In contrast, the education system espouses protection and quiet activity removed from political power games, thus enabling schools to devote themselves to the educational process.

11. Dynamism vs. conservatism

The media is portrayed as a dynamic system driven by the values of change, renewal, and flexibility whose aim is to create and stimulate interest. Communication products—primarily in the electronic media—are packaged to appeal to the youth and resonate with market messages that seek to attract the public.

The education system, on the other hand, is naturally conservative, large, complex, and traditional. Frequently, schools represent the values of preservation and national and disciplinarian continuity—values exemplified in the key fields of knowledge, the architectonic structure of the school, and class scheduling.

12. Circular vs. pyramidical knowledge

The media creates and markets circular knowledge which the listener or viewer requires no necessary prior knowledge to understand or enjoy. No exams are given and the listening/viewing frequently also produces a personal experience and an enhancement of knowledge.

The education system, in contrast, disseminate, generate, and reproduce pyramidical knowledge that is constructed in stages and calls for protracted intellectual and social effort to turn it into something meaningful. Education does not always allow choice and is based on exams, school processes often being linked to sanctions within a stringent framework that turns the learning process into a coercive rather than an enjoyable experience.

P4C in the cyberspace era: A new subject?

Students and teachers find themselves caught between these two forms of discourse -communication and education. While the "traditional media" discourse - embodied primarily in television - presents challenges to youth and adults alike, cyberspace, dubbed the "new media," poses new challenges to P4C educators/practitioners in that it freely transmits digital information electronically without emotional, existential, or political preconditions specific to any culture and promotes decentered knowledge (Landow, 1992).

As with adults, cyberspace is often presented to children as the place where truth or falsehood is irrelevant. It produces the illusion of a new narrative in which multiple bodies of knowledge - contingent, fluid, and hybrid - coexist and openness to diverse assumptions, perspectives, and criteria regarding knowledge, as well as divergent narratives and bodies of knowledge, is cultivated. As Balsamo (2011) indicates, at the same time as facilitating non-ethnocentrist dialogue amongst different opinions it also encourages multi-perspective reception of the diverse dialogues themselves. It thus poses a significant educational challenges in offering new possibilities for the articulation, representation, and acceptance of excluded voices in society in general and in schools in particular.

This new kind of intersubjectivity – what Langdon Winner (1997) calls "cyberlibertarianism" – reflects the web's chaotic, non-hierarchical interchange of information, values, identities, and interests that are always partial, temporal, and local rather than linear. While allowing everyone access, it thus has no universalistic pretensions nor makes any claims regarding the absoluteness its truths or the objective eternal validity of its foundations, criteria, agreed conclusions, or goals. In this sense, it constitutes the direct antithesis of the educational system discourse and narrative.

The challenges and issues this "new media" - or, more accurately, "new life" - raises relate to such concerns as: "How do we define 'human' in the present technological age?"; "Am I really in the world when I'm on Facebook?"; "Is there life after this life – on the internet – and if so, what kind will it be?" These questions are already being addressed in teacher-student discussions in P4C meetings.

Unfettered by claims of universal validity, cyberspace is free to let the Other express her views and opinions as not necessarily belonging to the "we," the "just" or the "truth." As Mark Poster (1995) argues, in such a nontranscendental, decentralized communication system, "originality," "authenticity," and "truth" become irrelevant. At the same time, and despite both public and academic enthusiasm for the internet and the array of opportunities and options it presents, it also creates the philosophical illusion of a dialogic space that offers multiple and competing possibilities within the research community represented by P4C (Lipman, 1997; Sharp, 2007; Matthews, 1984).

The philosophy in which the coming generation of P4C educators/practitioners engage must therefore face the challenges of the internet and cyberspace—and do so out of the willingness to confront the allure of an expanse that allows its users to "float free of biological and socio-cultural determinants" (Dery, 1994: 7). It also needs to create a form of solidarity via virtual communities and virtual democracy as offers by the net and cope with the fact that numbers of educators are forsaking critical thinking in favor of a rhetoric that promises the immediate – online - realization of a positive utopianism.

The communication/technology challenge and the philosophical challenge

Contemporary educators and practitioners – particularly those engaged in P4C – cannot afford to dismiss or reject the technological advances at their fingertips and those of their students but must find ways to incorporate them into the educational world and make real use of them. At the same time, they are faced with the question of whether to accept the communication discourse or endeavor to create what I offer as a "counter-narrative".

In the face of the media discourse that, while democratic and open, is also vociferous and shallow, academics, teachers and practitioners must collaborate with students to construct a community of enquiry that will promote an open discourse that distances itself from unnecessary and inaccurate generalizations, avoids stereotypes, encourages openness, and legitimates questions. In many cases, the catalyst is the stimulating—but also uncomfortable—factor of uncertainty. The discourse created in this community of inquiry must therefore be based upon a dialogue of parity that contains five components according to William Isaacs (1999):

1. Respect: Assume that you are among equals who are legitimate and important to the learning process—irrespective of whether or not you agree with them.
2. Listen: Listen for understanding and learning—not correctness. Be aware of your own listening to others by paying attention to "mental models" and obstacles that get in the way of what is being said and heard. Do not listen in order to respond or advocate: listen to understand.
3. Suspend judgment: Be aware of assumptions and certainties and learn to hold them apart or to the side without feeling compelled to act upon them.
4. Free yourself: Balance inquiry and advocacy. Free yourself from a rigid mindset. In inquiry, seek clarification and a deeper level of understanding—not the exposure of weakness.
5. Communicate your reasoning process: Talk about your assumptions and how you arrived at what you believe. Seek out the data on which assumptions are based, both your own and others.

In the words of Peter Senge,

> "Dialogue is not merely a set of techniques for improving organizations, enhancing communications, building consensus, or solving problems. It is based on the principle that conception and implementation are intimately linked, with a core of common meaning. During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together—not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but all of them together" (1994: 358).

As Slotte asserts:

> "Dialogue becomes a mere 'buzz word' in the service of the very unwanted forces that real dialogue challenges. This can happen when, for example, the goal of a dialogue is settled in advance. When pressure to reach the goal becomes high, real dialogue, creativity, surprise and joint investigation disappears. If dialogue and dialogical methods merely are incorporated in organizations, conflict situations and the classroom without questioning the dominating views on communication, learning, thinking together and interaction dialogue will only become a means to enhance the current practices that we wish to change. This is a core reason why a philosophy of dialogue is needed" (2004: 43).

Many adults, teachers, and educators being apprehensive of discussing controversial issues with children, however, and thus endeavoring to avoid dialogue, the P4C counter-narrative demands that they act courageously and overcome their fears (Haynes & Murris, 2011). It must likewise call upon them to resist any unnecessary appeal to emotional susceptibility and exploitation, making space for the decipherment of sensitivities and sensibilities in order to raise the emotional bar of the viewing public - youngsters and adults alike - and allow for serious and in-depth discussion of significant subjects. Philosophical educators must therefore engage in the following tasks:

1. Draw attention to the features I have identified here as characteristic of the communication discourse.
2. Demonstrate the importance of the communication discourse, especially as part of democracy.
3. Adduce the limitations from which the communication discourse suffers, particularly with respect to issues relating to emotions and their exploitation in promoting the ratings culture. Evincing the price the public pays as a result of the cynical use of emotions and their heightening - via reality shows, for example - in order to create a "virtual reality" they must, if possible, rename this an "overly-emotional reality."
4. Highlight the role of profound philosophic discourse, validate the demands of seriousness and responsibility it makes on those who engage in it, and present it as a counter-narrative to the communication discourse.

Running the risk that they may expose themselves to conflict with their students—many of whom do not possess media literacy skills—educators and practitioners must ensure that they themselves are media literate in order to help their students develop critical and creative abilities to deal with the media. At the same time, media education is not to be confused with either educational media or educational technology.

Conclusion

Teachers and students involved in Philosophy for Children are exposed more than ever today to two opposing forms of discourse - communication discourse and education discourse. In this paper, I have pointed out the central differences between these two discourses. Philosophy for Children educators must take steps today to familiarize their students with the factors at the heart of communication discourse, particularly those to which the students are most exposed. At the same time, teachers must not allow themselves to come out directly against communication or the open and democratic discourse that it fuels. Nor must they oppose the communication innovations that are the outcome of technological advances and the abilities these bestow. This requires that they acquire knowledge concerning media literacy in order to enhance their ability to create a counter-narrative that will equip students with the tools necessary for understanding the communication discourse—especially in relation to emotions and emotional responses. These tools will help students understand how the philosophical discourse differs and promote their ability to view the emotional world encouraged by the communication discourse with a critical eye. The intention is not to induce them to oppose this world or to alienate themselves from it but to approach it critically and engage it in dialogue.

Caught between the two antithetical discourses of "traditional media" and the "new media," P4C must strengthen itself and enhance the community of inquiry. The latter must represent and create both a philosophic space of activity and process, combined with intellectual depth, and a place for meeting face to face whose intimacy allows for the expression of the subject. Its counter-narrative must confront the daily challenges posed by the speed, immediacy, imminence, multidimensionality, task-oriented nature, and new form of public nature of the communication space and its accessibilitization and democratization of knowledge. It must either synthesize the two discourses or enable an open discussion of the narratives each embodies and promotes. A narrative that bridges the two worlds/worldviews can generate mutual trust between them on the one hand and illuminate the differences between them on the other.

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