ISSA Proceedings 2014 – Pragma-Dialectical Rules And The Teaching Of Argumentation In Philosophy For Children

Abstract: A Philosophy for Children teacher must model a discussion that complies with a critical ideal of reasonableness and use effectively all tools necessary to attract the students' involvement and participation in a meaningful philosophical dialogue. We distinguish the stages of a Philosophy for Children class where the pragma-dialectical rules and the pedagogical devices instrumental to enhance the students' participation in a community of inquiry ought to be applied.

1. *Introduction*
The Philosophy for children program, created by Matthew Lipman (Lipman, 1980, 1991), centers around the building of a *Community of Inquiry* through the practice of philosophical dialogue. The Community of Inquiry is considered as a way to foster critical and cooperative thinking through the balance between competition and cooperation in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding, similar to the scientific community in that it pursues similar goals through identical methods (Lipman, 1998, p. 57). The Philosophy for Children teacher is a member of the Community of Inquiry with no special privilege but she must see to it that the logical rules that conduct critical thinking are respected and guide the dialogue among the participants.

There is a deep connection between critical thinking and democratic participation. To participate effectively in democracy it is necessary to be able to argue correctly, to have an informed opinion, to express it clearly and to participate in debates both in small groups and in society at large. We restrict the meaning of 'critical thinking' to the fundamental aspect in which most definitions coincide: the ability to participate reasonably in a debate and to solve the

controversy reasonably. We consider that the pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 208) provide the fundamental criteria to determine what are a reasonable debate and a reasonable resolution of the controversy. Therefore, the Philosophy for Children teacher will find in them an essential tool for the conduction of philosophical dialogue in the Community of Inquiry.

Through the critical rules for a reasonable discussion, Pragma-dialectics provides the theoretical and the practical tools required to debate reasonably. Our intention in this paper is to show how the Philosophy for Children methodology requires and facilitates the introduction of the critical rules in the classroom. The role of argumentation is crucial both in the building of the Community of Inquiry and in education for citizenship. Because of its cooperative thinking strategies, which facilitate the introduction and practice of the critical rules, the Philosophy for Children methodology seems to us the best tool for the teaching of argumentation.

Certain pedagogical strategies are peculiar to Philosophy for Children. Through them, the process of learning argumentation can be initiated and the critical rules can be mastered. In order to visualize this process, we distinguish the different stages that can occur in a Philosophy for Children class and identify the steps that call for the introduction of the critical rules. This distinction was made in a research project in which we studied the development of democratic attitudes in students and teachers through the implementation of Philosophy for Children (Vicuña & López, 1994). We distinguished five stages:

1. Shared reading of the text,
2. Eliciting questions,
3. Finding relationships between questions,
4. Discussion, and
5. Complementary Activities.

Not all the stages are performed in every class, but usually reading, eliciting questions and discussion are present. We illustrate them by dialogues taken from the program's novels.

2. *Stages in a philosophy for children class*
In Philosophy for Children a 'philosophical novel' is used as a text from which to

start in order to create a common ground for discussion and to connect with the interests of the children. This is a narrative text in which the characters are children who interact with each other and with adults, conversing and wondering about everyday incidents both at home and at school. In them genuine children questions are reflected, which, at the same time, refer to some philosophical problems. This stage prepares the ground for the philosophical discussion that will emerge from the children's different reactions and questions prompted by the story.

For example, in the philosophical novel *Kio & Gus* (Lipman, 1992), designed for children in first and second grade of elementary school, Kio narrates the following incident occurred when he went with his grandfather to have lunch in town:

Next to the table where we were eating was a coatrack. It had a sign that said, 'Watch your hat and coat.' The coatrack was empty, of course, because it was summertime.
The sign bothered me, so I said, 'Grandpa, why does it say: 'watch your hat and coat'?'
He said, 'Because they might disappear'.
So, I guess there are things in the world that will disappear if you don't watch them! Isn't that weird!

By means of this dialogue the story relates to the children's experience of puzzlement concerning what is real. The students may connect with their own personal experiences of situations that cause them to wonder about the permanence of things beyond our perception.

Another example, taken from *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Lipman, 1982, p. 2), designed for children in fifth and sixth grades of elementary school. Harry, the main character in the novel, after realizing that he has made a mistake in answering to a question from his science teacher, reflects in the following way:

'So, there are things that revolve around the sun that aren't planets,' Harry said to himself. 'All planets revolve about the sun, but not everything that revolves about the sun is a planet.' And then Harry had an idea. 'A sentence can't be reversed. If you put the last part of a sentence first, it'll no longer be true.

Harry has discovered a logical law. His discovery will lead him to wonder about the meaning of a sentence that starts with the quantifier 'all' and to inquire into

the boundaries of logical expressions, such as *all, no, some*. He will eventually engage some of his classmates' interest into inquiring further about 'thinking about thinking'. This gives an idea of how the students reading the story can identify with the thinking processes of the characters and be stimulated to connect with their own ways of thinking.

Matthew Lipman, creator of the Philosophy for Children program, thought of the novels as a means to capture the complexity of children's experiences and, at the same time, as a way to help them organize them with a sense of unity and wholeness. Each novel contains a story which develops and ends having as background a philosophical theme, such as the knowledge of oneself, thinking rigorously, the discovery of the natural world, the foundation of moral norms, etc. In this way, the students can better understand and make sense of the complexity of their experiences. Besides, every novel refers, from a different perspective, to the philosophical problems discussed in earlier novels.

It could be said that the novels constitute a philosophical knowledge that embraces as in a spiral movement the whole of the children's experience, which is examined in the different levels of learning. This facilitates the students' exchange of different perspectives and helps them overcome the frustration produced by a way of teaching that presents knowledge as parceled in diverse areas without connection between them. The children' need for an integrating experience was among the first things that Lipman realized and he saw that philosophy could provide it.

On the other hand, the reading of the text provides the first stage in the building of a Community of Inquiry. Since the reading is shared by all members, they must take turns, listen attentively, pay attention to the turns, respect each other, avoid correcting or mocking a classmate who makes a mistake, etc. This is their first experience of sharing in the community. The teacher must guide this process in a way that generates an atmosphere of respect and empathy which will help prepare for the respect demanded by the critical rules that will be introduced later.

2.2 *Stage 2: Eliciting questions*
After finishing the reading of the text the students are invited to formulate questions or to share their impressions about the passage just read. The idea is to connect with the genuine interests of the students, so that the philosophical

discussion that would ensue is about these interests and not an 'adult agenda' imposed upon the students (Lipman, 1980, pp. 102-128). Their questions and commentaries must relate to the text, not necessarily as an interpretation thereof, but as something that the passage brought to mind. Therefore, it is important to ask the students to explain what the connection is between the reading and their questions and commentaries. In this way, the process of eliciting questions is a search for relevance, but not only in relation to the text, but also in relation to the students' own thinking. This may put the students in a rather vulnerable position, because their classmates may question their ideas or not understand them and they may be forced to clarify their meaning. This latent process of confrontation gives rise to an analysis and scrutiny which leads them to express what they really think instead of repeating opinions inadvertently introduced in their minds by custom or authority figures. In this search for clarifying the students' true thinking it is also important for the teacher to question opinions that are presented with the only purpose of impressing the audience or simply to establish a position of power. The questions and problems presented must be those that really matter to them, so that they will be willing to clarify them by discussion and common reflection.

Consequently, the process of eliciting questions calls for a teacher that helps the students clarify their contributions without 'indoctrination', that is without taking the advantage of reinterpreting what the students say so as to suit the teacher's preferred meaning. This role is fundamental in the building of the Community of Inquiry. It requires the ability to balance *flexibility* and *rigor*; *flexibility* to invite and admit all opinions, and *rigor* to demand that they express clearly their real thinking. Therefore, the teacher must ask the students to reformulate what they want to say until it becomes clear for all. In this way, she ensures a connection with the genuine interests of the students and with the shared interests of the group, in order to achieve both 'thinking for themselves' and 'cooperative thinking'.

From what has been said, it seems clear that the pragma-dialectical rules 1, (Freedom rule) and 4 (Relevance rule) (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 208), may be introduced at this stage, by reinforcing that all questions and opinions should be allowed to be expressed and, at the same time, that the proponents must be able to show how they relate to the text just read.

2.3 *Stage 3: Finding significant relationships between questions*

In the next step the students' questions and contributions are grouped by related themes. The students are invited to find significant relationships between their questions in order to determine the different topics of interest and to decide on the subject of the discussion. This requires a deeper understanding of each contribution and developing sensitivity to relevance. It often occurs that some contributions are too personal and originate a long list of anecdotes which may hinder the coherence and consistency of the discussion. Here again the teacher must balance the student's eagerness to participate against the weight of their contribution towards the cooperative enterprise. An excess of personal anecdotes may stop reflection and make it impossible to go deeper into the proposed theme. Therefore, the teacher must demand that the students go further than their personal experiences and realize that they are part of a more complex and controversial issue. At the same time as the students are invited to connect with their personal experiences as a basis for reflection, they are also made aware that other members of the class have similar experiences and that all this can be seen from a more general perspective.

Once all the questions and comments have been grouped in this manner, the students decide democratically which of the resulting themes they are going to discuss. The authors of the questions that originated the chosen topic must answer them tentatively and commit to a standpoint. Thus, they take a more critical view of their own opinions and become aware of the help that they can get from other members of the class for clarifying and resolving their doubts. This illustrates cooperative thinking. As an example of this process, we may consider the following dialogue from the novel *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Lipman, 1982, pp. 28-29):

'What I think Laura's saying,' said Jill, 'is that what we call thinking is something we do, like swimming or walking or riding.'
'That's right,' Laura agreed, 'that's just what I mean. When I said before I had a mind, I meant that I mind things. I mind the telephone, or my baby sister, or just my own business. 'Having a mind' is nothing but 'minding.''
But Fran wasn't happy with the solution Jill and Laura had arrived at. 'I agree,' she said, 'that maybe the mind isn't quite the same thing as the brain. I know I said before it was, but I've changed my mind.' Everyone giggled for a while, then Fran went on. 'What I mean is, you can't see electricity, but it's real. So why couldn't our thoughts be something electrical in the brain?'

This time it was Jill's mother who told the girls they would have to continue the conversation in the morning. 'Mom,' said Jill, 'what's a mind?'

Although the conversation narrated does not occur in class but at Jill's home, where Fran and Laura have been invited to stay overnight, it reflects well the kind of interaction that can take place among the children when they are trying to establish relationships between their questions and to clarify the meanings of their contributions. The girls had been talking about the persistency of some memories, like a musical tune and things like that, and the conversation has turned to whether things outside our minds can make us think about them and finally they have asked themselves what is a mind. An adult is present at the end of the dialogue, Jill's mother, but she is not presented as an authority figure that would settle the discussion. The girls' opinions are being refined by their own confrontation and analysis of what they mean by them. They may or may not arrive at a satisfactory opinion about the matter, but even if satisfactory, it would be provisory as long as they are willing to explore and reflect more deeply about it.

2.4 *Stage 4: Discussion of the selected themes*
Once the discussion themes are selected in the manner explained above, we may say that a genuine interest of the children has been expressed. This stage is previous to the introduction of the pragma-dialectical rule 1, Freedom rule (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 208), because, in order to identify their genuine interests, the children were invited to compare and establish relationships between their questions or comments and the other children's questions or comments and not to commit to a standpoint yet.

On the other hand, according to Pragma-dialectics, when a language user expresses a standpoint he commits himself to the truth of his standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 31), and is under the obligation of defending it, if questioned (Rule 2, Burden of proof rule). In contrast, in Philosophy for Children a standpoint that conforms to the criteria formulated in the pragma-dialectical rules may take some time to be formed and requires some previous steps.

After the group has decided on which of the proposed subjects is going to be discussed, the person who proposed it must give a preliminary answer. This puts him under the obligation of giving reasons, that is, under the pragma-dialectical

critical discussion Rule 2. Demanding reasons is, in fact, one of the basic strategies for conducting a session in Philosophy for Children (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980, pp.121-122). Otherwise it would be very difficult to foster cooperative reflection.

The following dialogue, excerpted from the novel *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Lipman, 1982, pp. 22-24), shows an exchange of argumentation among children about the schools' quality. (We skip the narrative and give the speakers' names).

Mark: (....) schools are awful everywhere.
Harry: What makes them so bad?
Mark: Grown-ups. They run the schools to suit themselves. (....)
Maria: Well, but someone has to run the schools, and so it has to be the grownups, because they know more than anyone else. It's the same with other things. You wouldn't want to fly on an airplane where the pilot was just a little kid, would you? And you wouldn't want to go to a hospital for an appendicitis operation where the surgeons and nurses were just little kids, would you? So what else is there to do but let grownup people run the schools because they're the only ones who can do it right?
Mark: I didn't think up the idea that kids should run the schools – you did -. (....)
Harry: It isn't a question of whether the grownups should run the schools, or whether the kids should. (....) The real question is whether the schools should be run by people who know what they're doing, or by people that don't know what they're doing.
Maria: What do you mean, 'know what they're doing'?
Harry: Understand, I guess. Whoever runs the schools should understand kids, for instance. I think Mark's right. Lots of times they don't. But the most important thing they need to understand is why we're in school in the first place.
Maria: We're in school to learn.
Harry: Are we? What are we supposed to learn?
Maria: Answers, I suppose. No, no, I take that back. We're supposed to be learning how to solve problems.
Mark: Should we be learning how to solve problems, or should we be learning how to ask questions?
Harry: We should be learning how to think.
Mark: We do learn how to think, but we never learn to think for ourselves. These teachers don't want to admit it, but I have a mind of my own. They're always

trying to fill my mind full with all sorts of junk, but it's not the town junkyard. It makes me mad.

The children are talking to each other after school. Mark states that "the schools are awful everywhere" and, after being questioned by Harry, adds that the adults are guilty, because "they run the schools to suit themselves." This shows that he has spontaneously put himself under the obligation of giving reasons (Rule 2). Due to the questionable character of this reason, it is challenged by Maria. She says that the adults must run the schools, because "*someone* has to run the schools, and so it has to be the grownups, because they know more than anyone else." Next, she offers a counter argument by analogy. In so doing, she is complying with the critical discussion rules (Rule 8, Validity rule) by using a valid argumentative scheme. On the other hand, Mark complains about Maria's argumentation: "I didn't think up the idea that kids should run the schools – you did." That is, he is accusing Maria of violating the critical discussion Rule 3 (Standpoint rule).

Mark's proposition has led to an *aporetic* situation. Harry looks for a new alternative that may help to find a better formulation of what Mark has in mind. He says that the people who run the schools must know what they are doing and this means that they must understand kids. He goes on to state that he agrees with Mark that many times adults don't understand children, but most importantly they need to understand why the children must go to school.

After Harry's intervention Mark can formulate more clearly his standpoints: 'We never learn to think for ourselves.' 'The teachers try to fill our minds with junk.' 'They don't accept that we have minds of our own.'

The discussion ends because no one comes back to this point. The controversy is unresolved, but this is not important from the point of view of Philosophy for Children, since the children lack the necessary information to resolve it. It is important, however, to notice Maria's intervention, when she corrects herself. After she had answered Harry's question, she thinks for a while and takes it back. The stress is put on the cooperation the children get from each other to formulate and reformulate their thinking, and not in the resolution of the controversy. The critical discussion rules are respected along the process, but the resolution would not be possible at this stage due to the students' lack of the necessary information.

2.5 *Stage 5: Complementary Activities: Discussions of concepts*
A frequent type of discussion in philosophy is a discussion about concepts. It is difficult sometimes to find a resolution, due to the fact that definitions are often dependent on many factors, especially on the purposes that the arguer has in mind. However, they constitute an excellent training in searching for assumptions, one of the main characteristics of philosophical dialogue (Lipman, 1980, p.119). In the philosophical novel *Pixie* (Lipman, 1982 p. 50) we find the following discussion:

Miranda said, 'Pixie, you know what mother said. We mustn't let anybody in. Rules are rules!' 'But mother didn't mean that we shouldn't let in people that we know,' I insisted. Miranda said, 'There are many weird people that we know and that mother wouldn't allow us to let in.'

It is difficult to decide which interpretation is correct. Both seem right. Although we could find some flaws in Miranda's attitude in trying to impose her authority to Pixie without giving reasons, what she says is true. It adjusts literally to what their parents had said. Pixie's interpretation, on the other hand, appeals to a more contextual prohibition: "Don't open the door to anyone!" is not an absolute prohibition; it does not apply to the people they know or are friends with. Without more information about the parents' intentions, it doesn't seem possible to resolve the discussion between Pixie and Miranda, but the students' discussion and analysis of this situation provides an excellent training in searching for assumptions underlying what people say. It is this kind of training what enabled Mark, in the previous example, to realize that Maria was unduly assigning to him a standpoint.

Discussions about concepts open a route to the critical rules that have to do with faulty assumptions (e. g. Rule 5, Unexpressed premise rule, van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 208).

Consider, for instance, the following dialogue, excerpted from El libro de Manuel y Camila [Manuel and Camila's book'] (Tugendhat, López & Vicuña, 2001, pp. 11-21):

(The children had been discussing about crimes and damages and Sebastián had suggested that killing is not such a serious offense because dead people don't suffer anymore. This caused much wondering to Camila and she talked about it at

home. Her uncle suggested a problem that she could propose to Sebastián. We quote just the dialogue indicating the speakers' names).

Camila: Suppose that you have committed a very serious crime and are permitted to choose whether you want to be executed or spend the rest of your life in prison. What would you choose?
Sebastián: I would choose to be executed, because the suffering would be rather short in comparison with the interminable suffering of years in jail.
Manuel: I don't think that you mean it seriously. Death is the worst thing that can happen to you.
Sebastián: Why do you say that?
Manuel: Think about the death penalty. Everybody considers it to be the worst punishment, even though it causes short pain.
Camila: That's it! In the question of death it's not a matter of suffering pain.
(A little later in the story Álvaro addresses Sebastián)
Álvaro: Would you really prefer to be killed?
Sebastián: I don't know, maybe.
Manuel: Only because you think that one doesn't feel pain?
(Sebastián did not answer, but it was apparent that he felt at a loss).

Camila's doubts are cleared away when she realizes that Sebastián is not making a distinction between damage and suffering pain. This insight has been possible through the interaction with her friends. From the perspective of Philosophy for Children, this interaction is successful, since an important distinction has been made. Although Sebastián does not want to admit it, the distinction is valid. This means that the critical discussion rule 9 (Closure rule) should apply and Sebastián should retract his original standpoint. But to demand this would mean to violate the spirit of the community of inquiry.

Dialogues in Philosophy for Children are different from the controversies that are the object of Pragma-dialectics. They are a little fragmentary, if compared with the resolution of a controversy. It should be taken into consideration also that children do not satisfy all the conditions of a rational arguer. Nevertheless, by participating actively in these dialogues, children develop certain important reasoning strategies, such as establishing distinctions, detecting underlying suppositions, and making adequate definitions of concepts, which will be fundamental for resolving controversies.

3. *Conclusion*

Philosophical novels provide models of how thinking and dialogue should be. They differ from the controversies examined by Pragma-dialectics in that they emphasize cooperative discussion. Children learn to listen to their classmates' opinions and to value them. Although the reasons they may give may have deficiencies and may reflect a very peculiar way of looking at the world, it is essential that they learn to give reasons for their opinions and be aware that they can learn from others. In contrast, the pragma-dialectical objective is the reasonable resolution of a controversy by applying the critical discussion rules.

However, there is a strong connection between the critical discussion rules and the development of a community of inquiry. It wouldn't be possible without the application of Rule 1. The children learn that all contributions are valid, but they also learn that they must be relevant; they must refer to the pertinent passage of the text. There is complete freedom to formulate questions or comments, as long as they are relevant to the subject under discussion. Cooperation in elaborating a contribution also conducts to tolerance towards the opinions of others and this very tolerance demands that we put ourselves under the obligation of giving reasons.

Some steps are implicit in the applying of Rule 1. To get a speaker to formulate a standpoint and to be prepared to back it up with reasons is a process that has been prepared by the first stages described: reading, formulating questions or comments about the text, and refining this contribution so that it may become a standpoint backed up by reasons. Rule 1 leads to Rule 2.

Rules 3 and 4 were mentioned in connection with the ability to detect underlying assumptions in discussions about concepts. Concepts don't have definitive borders; they can be applied according to context in a more restricted or a more relaxed way. This kind of debate is referred to in Pixie's discussion about the meaning of the word 'anybody' in the sentence: 'we mustn't let anybody in.' Does this mean 'absolutely nobody' or just 'the people we don't know'? Also in the passage where Mark complains that he didn't say what Maria has attributed to him. If the teacher had been present, she could have pointed out that this was a violation of Rule 3. Knowing Pragma-dialectics would grant her fundamental tools for the fostering of critical thinking.

Rule 5 was mentioned in connection with the discussion of concepts, since it

relates to the ability for detecting underlying assumptions, but we did not give examples. Anyway the teacher must know well all the rules, so that she can point out the argumentative flaws during the discussion process. The teacher's corrective role will soon be picked up by the students in what is referred to as 'the self correcting ability of the community of inquiry.'

Rules 7 and 8 are amply respected in the process of cooperative learning. Although Maria had incurred in an argumentative error by violating rule 3, she is still able to present an argument by analogy: 'children are not able to run a hospital; therefore, they are not able to run a school'. Learning argumentatively valid forms, albeit in a diffused way, is a fundamental part of learning to think cooperatively. In order to organize this learning, the pragma-dialectical rules and the analytical tools provided are indeed extremely valuable, especially for making explicit unexpressed parts of the argumentation and for evaluating arguments.

Rule 9 is not clearly emphasized in the novels, as was seen in the case of Sebastián. The model of a critical discussion that ends successfully is missing, but this deficiency can be overcome without altering the cooperative spirit of the community of inquiry. On the contrary, a discussion that is successfully resolved emphasizes this cooperative spirit, since it reflects respect for certain rules previously agreed upon.

Rule 10 is amply respected along this learning process. Clarifying the children's contributions, pointing out to language ambiguities, asking the children to be precise or to explain further the meaning of their expressions is something that the teacher of Philosophy for Children is constantly doing since the very early stages of the program.

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