

Somebodies-In-Particular: The Scenario Approach to Philosophy with High School Students

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Insofar as schools create identities that conform to the dominant norms and standards, they are making an Anybody of everybody. Insofar as students do not, or cannot, meet the standards of an Anybody, they are made into a Nobody; or conversely, insofar as students meet the highest standards expected of Anybody, they are permitted to be a Somebody. But none of these modes of identity are what is needed for democracy.

--Ronald David Glass¹

According to Ronald David Glass, the American educational system produces “Somebodies” who are no more able than “Nobodies” or “Anybodies” to become citizens in a just democratic community. Nobodies are the ones who never fit in and cannot achieve. Anybodies are those who fit in but neither achieve much nor contribute much to the community. Somebodies are those who achieve, but only through uncritical acceptance of mass media models. For example, they will use the accumulation of wealth as the chief measure of success and self-worth. If they vote at all, it will be along party lines instead of their vote being based on a critical contemplation of the issues. And they will rarely engage in much meaningful community service. These emerging adults think they are unique, well rounded individuals. But they lack the ability to engage in the sort of self examination necessary to evaluate and possibly even change their sense of selves. Glass argues that every child must become a “Somebody-in-Particular”. “A somebody who understands the process of identity formation within historical, social, and cultural horizons, and who is

committed to his/her own freedom and responsibility in that context,” he writes, “is a Somebody-in-Particular.”²

We believe Glass is correct. The proliferation of Anybodies, Nobodies, and Somebodies in American secondary schools goes a long way toward explaining the growing alienation we witness there. The statistics are alarming. Five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in October 1998 left school before October 1999 without successfully completing the degree.³ An estimated 841,450 females aged 20 and under became pregnant in the year 2000.⁴ Nineteen percent of high school students nationwide seriously considered suicide in 2001.⁵ The misery and poor judgment that accounts for these numbers stems from a failure in individual identity formation. Students do not know who they are and lack a vehicle for finding themselves. Without a robust sense of self, an individual cannot share in the collective vision that informs good citizenship, both in school and beyond. These problems will only get worse as curricula increasingly focus on the rote learning of traditional skills, and as governments mandate standardized testing of these skills, which causes “teaching to the test” to monopolize class time.

According to Fritz Oser, educators can address these problem by implementing what he calls the “Just Community Approach”. Inspired by Lawrence Kohlberg, Oser proposes that a moral education must include: “Learning by acting, by doing, by confrontation with the object and by personal experiences . . . (and by) role taking or empathy opportunities.”⁶ The special advantage of this proposal is that it is in line with the governmental social studies education guidelines of many countries.

Philosophy is rarely taught as part of the high school curriculum in North America. But we believe that philosophy, approached via a methodology in harmony with Oser’s proposal, is just the way to help teenagers become “somebodies-in-particular”. Philosophy is the “love of wisdom” that enables individuals to form their own identities. By exploring profound ideas and encouraging critical thinking, philosophy creates somebodies-in-particular who are committed to one another. The ancient Greeks who launched the tradition of Western philosophy also passed on the dictum “Know Thyself” because they had discovered that self knowledge is the building block of great civilizations. When at his trial Socrates says “The unexamined life is not worth living”, he has in mind precisely the sort of self knowledge we need to encourage. The probing questions philosophers have asked throughout the ages are of enduring interest to all human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, class, or age. Although it is commonly assumed that young minds are not capable of grasping the significance of these questions, this assumption has never been proven and in fact has been challenged in recent studies.⁷ We know from our own experience

with young people that this assumption is false. In fact, even most pre-schoolers are quite good “proto-philosophers”, for they never stop asking “Why?” Children only stop asking “Why?” when they enter school!

Yet doing philosophy with children is not easy. If philosophy is to become a major player in the transformation of our secondary schools, it is essential that we identify the special obstacles it presents in the classroom and develop strategies for overcoming them.

In our view, the most significant challenge young philosophy students face is learning to view disagreement as a positive thing: that asking for an argument is not asking for a fight. The common, perhaps natural, reaction to disagreement is vexation. The “fight or flight” instinct is liable to take over: students either become belligerent and even offensive in a disruptive form of engagement or withdraw apathetically into themselves, refusing to engage. Either of these instincts is often accompanied by a simple-minded relativism, particularly about ethical issues. It is hard not to be somewhat sympathetic to these reactions. For those unskilled in rhetoric and critical thinking, often the only response available is that of simply repeating a position in a louder voice while stamping a foot (we might call this the “percussive” defense). As for the apathetic response, not many teenagers can work up much enthusiasm for wondering whether they are brains in vats, being deceived by an evil demon, or what happens after death (teenagers, as we all know, think they are immortal). So what pedagogical techniques can be used to minimize these counterproductive reactions?

As is well known, Matthew Lippman’s approach to philosophy with children centers around the discussion of philosophical stories. The advantage of this approach is that fiction is effective in stimulating student interest. The disadvantage, however, is that reading or listening to a story written by someone else is a passive process. Students need to transition from the story into dialogue with one another that is bound to involve, and in fact ideally does involve, disagreement. Here the fight or flight mechanism kicks in and threatens to undermine any progress made through the story. We believe, however, that an alternative to Lippman’s approach can avoid this problem.

We are currently co-authoring a multi-volume textbook for philosophy with high school students entitled *Wonderings*. It features what we are calling the “scenario approach” which, we believe, preserves all the advantages of storytelling while avoiding its disadvantages. Each chapter begins with a casual and realistic conversational exchange between two teenagers who disagree (for example, over what love is or whether lying is always wrong). Their disagreement illustrates two philosophical positions on an issue. A set of questions meant to help stimulate and direct discussion follows the scenarios.

Each chapter then goes on to explore the two philosophical positions within their historical contexts in greater detail. We try to do this in a way that keeps the issues alive for the students, by using illustrations, making use of thought experiments, and including more scenarios. More difficult material and the explorations of subtle distinctions are relegated to appendices to the chapters. Through this method, the textbook introduces students to philosophical concepts such as beauty, truth, and justice, while providing a model of effective dialogue.

Can the scenario approach help to create “somebodies-in-particular”? This is the question we are currently investigating. We have the good fortune of being in the position to test and refine our textbook and the scenario approach in a course for high school students made possible through the Carroll-Cleveland Philosophers’ Program (CCPP). CCPP began as a small middle school for troubled but gifted teenagers from the inner-city. It has been meeting in the basement of a residence hall on our campus for four years. Unfortunately, due to the recent school district budget cuts, CCPP can no longer continue as a middle school. At the same time, however, a new opportunity has arisen. With the help of several foundations, we have arranged for one hundred juniors and seniors from East High School in the Cleveland Municipal School District to attend our campus every Friday (fifty per semester) for a full-day course called “Philosophy and Service Learning.” Growing up in one of the worst performing school districts in the United States, East High students suffer from numerous environmental risk factors, including extreme poverty, exposure to pervasive violence, the prevalence of illegal drugs, and a lack of sustained family support. We aim to provide a positive university experience that will encourage them to stay in school and pursue higher education.

In addition to the scenario approach, our teaching practices are informed by several cutting edge pedagogies. For example, we endorse the multiple intelligences theory, which recognizes several different styles of learning corresponding to several different types of mind.⁸ Furthermore, we employ situated learning techniques that help to vary the classroom experience and validate nontraditional expressions of competence.⁹ Because the course is a collaborative effort, we are able to combine our expertise.

We begin each two-hour class by showing a videotape of undergraduate college teaching assistants acting out the scenario for that week’s chapter. Our teaching assistants are drawn from a variety of majors, but all have shown some proficiency in philosophy. (At John Carroll University, all students are required to take three full courses in philosophy.) Following the scenario, we form groups to discuss the issues using the question set as a guide, and we read from the chapter about the issues. Discussion groups are kept small, and each is led by one of the undergraduate teaching assistants, together with a teacher from

East High, as the two of us circulate. While the East High teacher is valuable as a familiar and authoritative presence, the undergraduate teaching assistant is valuable as a near peer. Following lunch together in the university cafeteria, students embark on the service component of the class. When we discuss beauty, service placements might include assisting at an art therapy clinic, making crafts with residents of a geriatric facility, or exploring the concept of beauty with visually impaired persons. We strive to help the students connect the classroom lesson with the service outing in meaningful ways.

As students gain more experience with the scenario method, they will be asked to formulate their own views, find partners, and write a scenario of their own. Some will act out their scenarios, in front of the class. Others will record them on video for the small groups to consider. Students always use pseudonyms in their scenarios to encourage experimentation with views they may not be ready to adopt as their own, encouraging them to try on personal attitudes as they would try on clothes.

Ultimately, one does not learn about life in the classroom. But one can master patterns of thought in the classroom that one can apply in real life where valuable lessons are learned. Our theory is that, by asking the students to adopt active scenario roles, they will begin to enjoy dialogue and incorporate effective dialogue skills into their real lives outside the classroom. Through real life dialogue they will begin to pose difficult questions, investigate new ideas, construct their own goals in life, and begin to formulate plans for achieving those goals.

The first chapter of our book is called “What is love?” It examines the question of whether love is rational, as Plato held, or irrational, as Montaigne held. A number of complex ideas are involved in each of these positions. The scenario that introduces the chapter is designed to lay these concepts on the table while modeling an edifying disagreement between two people. It is as follows:

The Photograph

Matt and Jenn are two old friends having lunch together. As they are finishing, Matt pulls a photograph out of his wallet.

“Well, here she is, Jenn.” Matt announces as he proudly hands the picture to her.

“My new girlfriend, Shawna. Ain’t she beautiful?”

Jenn glances disinterestedly at the photo. “How could I tell whether or not she’s beautiful from an image?”

“What do you mean?” he snaps, snatching back the photograph. “It’s a great picture. You’re just jealous ’cause I’m in love.”

“Yeah right. I’m actually making a point, ok? Beauty isn’t something you can see on the outside. It’s in a person’s soul. I’d have to know Shawna to be able to tell whether she’s beautiful.”

“Well then take my word for it, hon,” Matt responds, leaning back in his chair and smiling broadly. He ticks off each item on his fingers as he continues: “She’s attractive, she has a good job, she’s a great dancer, and she makes everyone laugh. How could you not love a woman like that? I’m telling you, this is the real thing.”

“Matthew, Matthew, Matthew.” Jenn responds, shaking her head. True love isn’t about checking off items on a list. So, if Shawna gets laid off from work and runs out of good jokes, you’re not gonna love her anymore? And what if she’s in an accident that scars her face and leaves her crippled? Are you gonna dump her for some other attractive dancer?”

“Whoa! Those are some pretty awful prospects I don’t need to be worrying about. But I will say this. Beauty *must* be something you see on the outside because otherwise people would never fall in love. Haven’t you ever heard of love at first *sight*? How do you explain that? Some kind of soul radar?” Matt wiggles his fingers over his head like antennae to poke fun at her view.

“Come on! There are a lot of different kinds of love. I know you have a soul because you’ve changed a lot on the outside since we became friends, but you’re still the same person that I love.”

“Oh God! Let’s not get all mushy now,” Matt responds making a face.

Jenn crosses her arms and sticks her tongue out at him, and then he does it back.

Question Set

Why does Jenn think beauty is something you can’t see? Why does Matt think it’s something you can see? Who do you agree with more, and why? Describe someone you think is beautiful. Do you think this person is beautiful because of the qualities you described or because of something else? Describe someone you love. If someone asked you why you love this person, what would you say? Explain the difference between romantic love and friendship love.

As is evident, the scenario is designed to draw the students in through all the standard literary techniques, such as character development, humor, and conflict. Our hope is that students will find themselves taking sides with one or the other of the characters. This way, all the ingredients for a good classroom discussion are already brewing. In the body of the chapter, they are introduced to Plato, Montaigne and their theories of love. To understand Plato on love, one needs to have the concept of an abstract idea, so that is included as well. There

are stories (the love of Odysseus and Penelope, for example), and thought experiments (suppose you were to be presented with a clone of a loved one who had died. Could you love this “new” person?). An appendix to the chapter reviews the arguments found in Plato’s *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, exploring the concept of akrasia, and providing more detail on Plato’s theory of forms. The chapter ends with another set of discussion questions, suggestions for further reading, and a challenge for the students: writing lyrics for a song that expresses their own philosophy of love.

One other feature of our approach is worth noting. The students will be recording their reactions to the scenarios and their responses to the question sets in journals. Toward the end of the semester, we will ask them to revisit earlier scenarios and record their latest responses. Thus we will have an assessment measure for the effectiveness of the scenario approach. This “pre” and “post” measure will also help us refine the scenarios and question sets, and indeed improve the text as a whole.

We do not claim that the techniques we have outlined will completely eliminate the three difficulties of disruptive engagement, apathy, and simple-minded relativism (mentioned above). We fully expect that these attitudes will be present initially, particularly as a bond of trust needs to grow between teachers and students. We believe, however, that the difficulties will dissipate as students’ comfort level with the process of reacting to and creating scenarios increases.

The first task of every young person is to become a human being. Human beings possess a special dignity that stems from their awareness of themselves as selves. Young people need time in school to develop this sense of self. A healthy sense of self not only keeps them out of trouble but also enables them to reach out and help others. Secondary schools around the world are in disrepair. We can keep shearing the surface of the problem or we can go to its root. The root of the problem is that young people are not learning to think critically about the world around them as a place to be transformed by their own unique contributions; in short, they are not doing philosophy. The problems we face as a global community cannot be solved by Somebodies, Anybodies, or Nobodies. But they can be solved by Somebodies-in-particular. Let’s start making way for them now.

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Notes

¹ Ronald David Glass, "Education and the Ethics of Democratic Citizenship," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 19 (2000), 287.

² Ibid, p. 290.

³ National Center for Education Statistics. <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/dropout/>>.

⁴ Alan Guttmacher Institute. <www.agi-usa.org/pubs/teen_stats.html>.

⁵ National Center for Health Statistics. <www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hs/tables/2003/03hus058.pdf>.

⁶ Fritz Oser, "Kohlberg's Educational Legacy," *New Directions for Child Development* 47 (1990): 85

⁷ See, for example, A. Gopnik, et al., *The Scientist in the Crib: What Early Learning Tells us About the Mind* (New York: Perennial Books, 1999) and Usha Goswami, *Cognition in Children* (East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press, 1998).

⁸ H Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁹ J. Lave and E. Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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