The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Teaching Thinking

Rupert Wegerif, Li Li, James C. Kaufman

Becoming a questioner in a philosophy class

Publication details
Baruch B. Schwarz, Benzi Slakmon
Published online on: 03 Jun 2015

How to cite :- Baruch B. Schwarz, Benzi Slakmon. 03 Jun 2015, Becoming a questioner in a philosophy class from: The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Teaching Thinking Routledge
Accessed on: 31 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
37

Becoming a questioner in a philosophy class

Baruch B. Schwarz and Benzi Slakmon

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

Introduction

The realm of teaching has been shattered by new theories of development that stress the active role of learners in their interactions with their teachers. Socio-cultural theories refer to these interactions as kinds of *guided participation* (Rogoff, 1990). And the term *didactics* that refers to perennial techniques teachers use in different domains has definitely bad press nowadays (especially in Anglo-Saxon countries). The legacy of Comenius seems less relevant to a world in which the becoming of the learner does not consist only of conforming to the values of an immutable society and of acquiring the canons of scientific or professional fields. Rather the learner is expected to explore ideas, social relationships or identity. Researchers in identity development put conformity at a stage behind the ultimate stage of exploration. In this context, the role of the teacher is particularly complicated because communication between teacher and learners traditionally involves power relations—the domination of the teacher over his/her pupils (Cazden, 2001).

While authority may be an obstacle for learning procedures and skills, the realm of ideas and of thinking turns the role of the teacher more complicated. If we aim at helping the development of an autonomous citizen ready to explore possibilities in a changing world, obedience and acceptance of ideas proposed by ancestors is not appropriate. One of the domains in which the challenges of teaching have not been successfully addressed is the domain of *questioning*. Numerous reports on school activity show that in the vast majority of classroom talk, questions are initiated by the teacher, not by his/her students (e.g., Cazden, 2001). Researchers have been aware of this evident weakness since educational research has existed. And indeed, Dillon (1984) has linked questioning to the most up-to-date learning and teaching theories. It was central in Dewey’s logic of inquiry (Dewey, 1933), and was also central when Bloom’s taxonomy was fashionable (Sanders, 1966). Then it moved to the cognitive realm and to classroom talk. Especially according to the cognitive perspective, “questioning” is considered as an important cognitive skill one can acquire through intensive training. Dillon opens his concluding article in the following terms:
To sum up, we do not know much about questioning and discussions. We have volume of research on questioning—but not in discussion. We have a body of research on discussion—but not in classrooms. What we have is bits and pieces; the rest of the picture is blank . . . the greater part of knowledge is . . . privately held by skilled teachers as intuitive, implicit, knowledge-in-action.

(p. 50)

Dillon distinguishes between two kinds of teacher activities. Recitation is happening when students and the teacher are engaged with the already known or what is about to be discovered through teachers’ techniques. Recitation could be review, drill, quiz, or even guided discovery, inquiry teaching, or Socratic Method. In contrast with Recitation, Discussion refers to activities done when students and the teacher engage in what they don’t know. Practically, Dillon suggests that a lesson is counted as discussion when it is planned by the teacher as such, the students recognize it as such, and their amount of talk time is no less than 40 percent of the talk.

Recent research on questioning has basically remained stuck to the cognitive stance and has not accompanied the socio-cultural and the dialogic new trends. Some recognize the effectiveness of questioning as a predictor of further learning in classroom activities (e.g., Zuckerman, Chudinova, & Khavkin, 1998). Others found that fostering questioning in isolated activities often yields substantial cognitive gains (e.g., Chin & Osborne, 2010). Since questioning is difficult to trigger, researchers have developed tutoring systems that engage students in dialogues in which questions are posed by the virtual agent to the individual student. For example, Koppa, Britt, Millis, and Graesser (2012) showed superior cognitive gains for students engaging in activities with dialogic tutoring systems that pose problems and questions, evaluate the quality of responses and, when necessary, give feedback, hints and prompts in an effort to maximize learning. Typically, virtual agents engage a student in a mixed initiative dialogue with life-like animated pedagogical agents. Typically, the problems or questions presented by the agent typically roughly require a paragraph of information to answer correctly. A lengthy answer may be required, but students’ initial answers to questions are typically short (Graesser et al., 2004, 2005). It is at this juncture that a dialogue is helpful. The ITS AutoTutor engages the student in a dialogue by asking questions and giving feedback to answers in an attempt to get the student to produce a correct and complete answer through self-explanation and self-generation. In spite of the positive results that such tutoring systems yield, one can ask whether the discourse instigated by the tutor is really dialogic and whether the questioning done fits a Discussion context. Indeed, it appears that the tutor “knows” the answers to questions he/she/it asks. It is telling that Dillon refers to such an activity as rote learning. The questioning is mainly done by the teacher who also frames the problem-solving situation, and in which the student enters docilely. In this framework, even when students initiate the questioning following proper prompts, this may lead to cognitive gains but practicing such questioning cannot turn learners to better questioners. Many studies in developmental psychology have been undertaken (see, for example, the review by Wong, 1985) to propose different theories. However, an important study by Henderson and Moore (1979) has shown the dramatic decrease in questioning rate in their passage from home family to schools. The issue is then cultural. Becoming a good questioner does not only mean acquiring another thinking tool: it involves appropriation of discursive norms, epistemological stance of doubt, wondering, recognition of the distinction between appearance and the real. Culturally, it might require abandonment of one own speech community’s ways of talk. For example, this is the case for children brought up in communities in which authoritative parenting also means that questioning the fathers is not acceptable, as sayings expressed by them are considered to be indisputably true. It is also the case of communities in which children are not supposed to
Becoming a questioner in a philosophy class

take part in serious conversations of adults, or places where children have learned to believe that being imaginary and exploratory about things and ideas is essentially wrong (Brice Heath, 1983, 2012).

A richer, more dialogical, perspective on questioning, proposing a framework in which nobody really knows the answer, is to be found back to Dewey’s *How We Think* (1933) according to which problems are not ready-made, and must be constructed out of a problematic situation. Being a good questioner requires learners to change their state of mind—to be curious and to be open to the world, and to freely express a motive to know more about various topics. This was one of the objectives of an ambitious year-long course in humanities. Following Engle and Conant (2002), we knew that principled design rather than direct intervention should characterize the role of the teacher in the complicated task of turning the school learner to a good questioner.

A year-long course in humanities

The course was inspired by *Philosophy for Children* (P4C, Lipman, & Sharp, 1978; Lipman et al., 1980; Lipman, 2003)—a program aiming to foster students’ thinking skills—critical, creative, and caring—through apprenticeship in a community of philosophical inquiry. Although the program can be seen as a course in philosophy with its own writing and drillings, it consists in a complete pedagogy, instrumental regardless the content under which it is implemented. *Philosophy for Children* (P4C) is regarded as a manifestation of *dialogic pedagogy* (Hardman & Delafield, 2010), and proven for its achievements in promoting sustainable cognitive learning gains and socio-emotional effects, such as students’ self-perception as learners and as problem-solvers (Topping & Trickey, 2007).

The second author, who was also a teacher, elaborated the course in accordance to Lipman’s late writings (2003). It seeks to foster students’ *philosophical disposition*, as opposed to capabilities. Becoming a member of such a philosophical community necessitates multiple engagements. First of all, the engagement is epistemological. It moves to a sort of regression towards semantics of the key ideas (Passmore, 1970). The act of going beyond definitions we take for granted, and the effort to adopt more acceptable ones as a precondition for further elaboration of the dilemma or problem at stake lies at the very heart of the philosophical activity. According to the design of the program (1) discussions were based on canonic texts (biblical stories, celebrated historical texts, etc.) and students’ own writing, (2) a large part of the curriculum was dedicated to small group talk about “big questions,” and finally (3) CSCL tools were used as discursive platforms for the elaboration of philosophical discussions. The latter two distinctions were designed specifically in order to analyze the entire classroom chain of activity, from the teacher’s institutional voice, through the small group’s meaning making as an intermediate level to the personal interpretation of the individual student (Stahl, 2006). Argumentative practices are central to members of this community becoming more open to new perspectives and to “the other” (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2010).

The philosophy course on which we focus took place with 8th graders in a junior high school whose policy is to integrate students with very different socio-economic levels. The year-long course was organized around three general themes: Justice and the notion of inequality; Truth, especially as manifested in the notions of “understanding” and “interpretation”; and the idea of “the Good.” At the same time, there was a constant transversal engagement in dialogue as well as with the question of the “good conversation.” The discussions analyzed are taken from the third learning cycle, which dealt with the notion of “the Good.” Along the year, students were involved in different types of activities to facilitate the practicing and appropriating of a
community of philosophical inquiry norms (Lipman, 2003): listening to one another with respect; building on one another’s ideas; challenging one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions; assisting each other in drawing inferences from what has been said; and seeking to identify each other’s assumptions. A community of philosophical inquiry usually includes the following: introduction of a text; construction of the agenda through collecting students’ contributions, questions and fields of interest; solidifying the community; the use of exercises to consolidate understanding and to achieve greater meaning. We will describe here the first cycle and a unit belonging to the third (last) cycle of activities in the course. The first cycle was about justice and inequity. It was also a cycle in which several practices were intensively enacted in consecutive activities: silent individual reading, small group discussions, argumentative writing, and interpretation of stories. As a part of the interpretative effort, the teacher (who is the second author) guided students to ask questions. The cycle consisted of:

1. The reading of the story of Cain and Abel with a literal interpretation of it;
2. Discussion about tales on Cain and Abel and contemplation of creations of art on the story of Cain and Abel (e.g., Gustave Doré’s lithography);
3. Round of turns: what are the questions that the story arises (homework: classification of big and small questions and answers to some of them);
4. Reading of the story and reflection on the homework;
5. Repartition in small groups; familiarization with Argunaut—a computerized tool for co-constructing an argumentative map of discussions in small groups (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2011); completion of the homework;
6. Argumentative writing on the topic: What are the causes of inequality between humans?
7. Individual reading of Rousseau’s celebrated article (1755) “Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men”;
8. Collective reading of Rousseau’s article;
9. Arrangement of the class in small groups; Argunaut discussions on students’ questions from previous lessons;
10. General discussion as a philosophical community on the responsibility for Abel’s murder;
11. Small groups interpret the difficult (syntactically and conceptually) verse “If thou doest well, will not [thy countenance] look up [with confidence]? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door; and unto thee [shall be] his desire, and thou shalt rule over him”;
12. General discussion on what was learned during the cycle;
13. Final argumentative essay on the origins of inequality. The cycle ended with the final day evaluation in which the teacher identified changes in the essays primarily to show social and cultural origins of knowledge.

This cycle was targeted to two lines: the lines of philosophical ideas and the line of general practices (argumentative writing, small group discussions, questioning, collective reflection, etc.). The stress on questioning is considerable, not as a skill but as a way to approach philosophical issues. The philosophical ideas change and they are built one upon the other. The general practices did not change. We will show in this chapter that the coupling of change of ideas and stability of practices is central for the development of a community of philosophical inquiry. The iterative enactment of these practices, especially the ones related to questioning led students to adopt new dispositions for philosophical questions. Evidence for this strong claim will come in this chapter from descriptions of questioning activities in the first cycle, and from the third cycle, at the end of the year, when students approached a socio-scientific dilemma and freely
Becoming a questioner in a philosophy class

adopted a philosophical questioning perspective to handle it. Elsewhere, we study the trajectories of participation (Ludvigsen et al., 2011) of students in consecutive activities in order to trace changes in practices and ideas and different social settings.

The first cycle: learning to be a questioner

The first cycle began with an immersion of the students in cultural assets: biblical texts already known (superficially) or contemplation of art items. The teacher instigated various kinds of talk around these resources. For example, after the reading of the story of Cain and Abel, the teacher invited students to ask questions in a round of turns on the text. We list some of these questions:

- **Dor1:** Why did God take Abel’s offering only?
- **Agam2:** Why will Cain’s murderer be punished seven times as much?
- **Shira3:** Why did God put a mark on Cain only after he understood that he will be killed by people who will meet him?
- **Gil4:** Why Cain did not reconcile himself with the fact that his brother succeeded more than him?
- **Nadav5:** If God knows that Cain is about to kill Abel, does this mean that he created Cain to perpetrate that? Why to create somebody that will kill somebody else?
- **Barry6:** Cain assassinated Abel. Why God did not kill him instead of cursing him?
- **Amos7:** What was the real reason for Abel’s murder?
- **Ya’ara8:** Who was Cain’s wife?
- **Avi9:** What was the last conversation between Cain and Abel?

It is clear that some of these questions focus on factual details (Agam2, Ya’ara8), while others are profound (Dor1, Nadav5, Barry6). This is exactly what the teacher asked students to do as a homework assignment: to classify questions according to big and small questions. Before undertaking the classification, the teacher invited students (1) to read aloud the story of Cain and Abel, (2) to identify the big questions but to sort them according to (a) really big questions that don’t have simple answers and (b) not-so-big questions which require clarifications or a simple interpretation and (3) to give answers to at least two big questions. This session was done without giving definitions of big and small questions. Rather, students relied on their personal judgment. During the session that followed this activity, the teacher reflected on the homework assignment and prepared his lesson by concentrating on Dor’s question “Why did God take Abel’s offering only?”

The lesson was held in a classroom equipped with speakers and a projector, thus enabling the teacher to capitalize on video and audio recordings of previous lessons, to reflect upon common ways of talk and ideas. Moreover, homework was regularly sent over to the teacher by e-mail, or posted in the classroom blog prior to the following lesson. Thus, the teacher could build on students’ current state of understanding to broaden and deepen the discussion in relevant areas. Instead of quoting textbooks and other resources, he was able to do so through referring to students’ intellectual and discursive achievements. The teacher started by outlining the plan of the lesson:

I want to go over with you on several things from your homework and from the previous lessons. We will learn things that relate to the way you write, the way you talk, the way you think together. We will try to explain some of the things that are related to these issues, so I’ll show some of your writings and some recordings from the last session. But let’s recall the story. Who wants to read?
After reading the Cain and Abel story again (according to the P4C format of cyclic reading in which each student reads aloud one sentence), the teacher moved the discussion forward by starting asking about the differences between “big” and “small” questions:

T: so, what are we dealing here with?
Nadav: with what big questions are
T: right, distinguishing the small questions from the big questions
Amos: that has an answer
Nadav: (that has) [got an] answer
T: that has an answer that is not...
S: [Easy] (that has an easy answer)
T: that is not...
Amos: . . . requires [understanding]
Nadav: [requires] creative thinking
T: Excellent answer too. It necessitates creative thinking but in order to handle this is to see whether the question opens another one or not. OK, so what are big questions? [pause] I ask, we read in order to see that you understand, so the one who didn’t answer can ask.

Nadav: Hmm, big questions begin with definitions that are fund . . .
T: Fund . . .
Nadav: Fundamental with respect to the sense of words for cases of justice and truth. These questions help to understand not only things but ourselves and ways in which we think and act
T: OK, ah, Anna, you know there is a problem . . . why should I confuse you? There is a dictionary, I want to understand what beautiful is, what just is, what truth is, so I simply look at the dictionary and I’ll read there
Anna: Yes
T: So why do you need all these?
Anna: All what?
T: All that, all these (these texts)?=
= S: I know [pause]
=T: OK, this is what our lesson is about
Anna: To think about the meaning of this in another way, not like a dictionary, not=
=T: What?=
=Anna: Not one definition=
= T: OK. One definition . . . We can think about many definitions↓
=Anna: Also something deep
= T: It’s not necessarily deep, well what do you mean by not deep?=
=Anna: It’s not ↓[ . . . ]
= T: It doesn’t enter into details, it doesn’t fit all situations. Agam? Are you with me? In fact you can say that everything is clear in the world. There are dictionaries, right? And there are definitions, and everything is defined and it’s possible to go there, but it happens to you to think about big questions, you know that you can’t consult dictionaries. Dictionaries can’t tell you what is right in a specific situation.
That is, what is true in a specific situation, what is beautiful . . . They can tell you what beauty is but they can’t tell whether=
Whether it’s beautiful or not

Whether it’s beautiful or not. Secondly, and this is the important thing in fundamental definitions, a definition in a dictionary already exists, but when you deal about philosophical thinking, we deal with big questions, we are involved in defining the dictionary. We try to say: we should think about it in that way and not differently. For example that Cain was right or not. It’s equity and it’s inequity.

This episode could not occur in the Grade 8 class without preceding activities during which students intuitively sorted the questions they generated according to small and big questions, and attempted to solve some of the big questions. The students gave their own definitions of big questions “with no clear answer”, “that necessitates creative thinking to answer them”, “that help to understand ourselves, and help to behave in our lives”, etc.). The teacher here is indispensable to allow for this diversity of meanings. And this is a time students are in the middle of their efforts to understand what inequity is, and through the texts, they begin to understand that the question of inequity is extremely complex. Anna’s attempts to see in big questions something with more than one definition or something deep, naturally lead the teacher to consider the philosophical inquiry as contextual—as giving meaning to specific situations.

The teacher also reflected on the ways they talked together in ways that promote thinking or not. He also gave directions about good writing, whose form is argumentative and whose essence is philosophical (in the sense that it is moved by the need to know in order to act well in the world). The teacher then asked each of the students to choose two big questions and to write about them, to extend the questions, to explore possible directions for answers, and to inquire about deeper understandings of the issue. The teacher asked each student to individually write an essay and to send it to him electronically.

Questioning in the course involved not only a differentiation between big and not-so-big questions but also the location of questioning in the social sphere—not a thinking skill to be cultivated alone. We present here a short protocol that stresses this social aspect of questioning:

Daniel1: Let’s ask perhaps where Babylon is today
Shira2: Why actually [this question]?
Josh3: Who are the people of Babylon today=
Shira4: =What’s ( . . . ) Babylon?
Josh5: Who are the people from Babylon, today=?
Daniel6: =This city doesn’t exist anymore, right?

We see that questioning is clearly seen as a joint effort (Daniels’ “Let’s ask” in line (1) and is carved by Josh as a refinement of Daniel’s question and is précised once again in Daniel’s (6), who was the very student to ask the question in fuzzy terms in (1).

It is in this context that students read Rousseau’s essay, first individually, then collectively. The subtle import of Rousseau’s essay in the middle of the issue of big/small questions about Cain and Abel’s biblical story boosted the productivity of a new practice—critical electronic small group discussions with Argunaut, a system that displays a personalized argumentative map of the developing discussion (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2011): The teacher invited students to discuss four big questions he proposed. The rest of the cycle oscillated between interpretation of texts (Bible or Rousseau) and discussion/writing on the theme (justice and inequality). The final essays on this theme were the fingerprints of the progressive constitution of a community of philosophical inquiry.
The third cycle: questioning about the world

The third cycle was an opportunity to capitalize on the mini-culture elaborated in the two first cycles to wonder and to ask, about various issues, for example to socio-scientific dilemmas (thinning up embryos). We present here a typical discussion of a small group of four students about the Plato’s allegory of the cavern, according to which one of the prisoners, who freed himself from his chains, and flew away from the cave, comes back to his companions but they kill him when he tries to free them:

S1: Yeah, Now figure out that one of the occupants of the cave could free himself from his chains. OK. The first thing that he asks himself is from where the shadows he sees on the wall of the cavern come. What do you think that will happen when he will turn his head and will see the different figures that peek over the wall?

G2: It’s as if he isn’t obliged to be enchained. He can be prisoner of his thoughts. As if he isn’t allowed to do something, and now he’s doing it =

E3: =What I can’t understand is why they kill him. If they didn’t kill him, they would have been able to turn around, to see things, and they won’t kill him.

S4: No^, they kill him

B5: It’s written that they kill him=

E6: =What did they do^? They jumped like that?= G7: Yeah:

S8: It’s as if they didn’t want to believe what he said to them. They were rigid

E9: Ah, like in Matrix^!

G10: What?

E11: It’s the same as in Metrics, what? You’re fools?

S12: =Ah, it’s as if there’s another universe, and then=>

E13: =As if in Matrix, they don’t, they don’t want to, as if all people in Metrics

B14: Uhu

G15: Right

G16: They don’t want to believe that=

E17: =like They don’t want to believe, the ones who went out=

G18: =This Neo who went out =

E19: =Not only Neo, there was this bald guy who betrayed them, right?= S20: =Oh my god (in English), it’s really like in Matrix

G21: Very clever. Nice!

[giggling]

S22: Ehm, so, what do you. what do we say? That this is a replica of the reality of people <that are rigid> in their thought? Not open to new ideas. So^ people like=

G23: =And the one who escaped, this is the one who will govern them, the one who is open to new ideas

E24: =Maybe, it’s as if they tried to define people, that . . . in an extreme way, that live now, who believe in something=

S125: =And this is linked to the fact that this is his truth and it’s their truth. Because he believes in something [that they don’t believe in]=

E26: = [it’s linked to the Good^], perhaps their good is=

S27: =Yeah! Yeah, waw, waw, it’s true, you’re big guns=
Becoming a questioner in a philosophy class

=G28:  What, what did they say?
S29: =That it’s their Good, not his=
G30: =waw
S31: =>As if, everybody has his good< [and their good is] to focus on, it’s and to believe that
G32 [nobody wants to]
B33: Who said that? A.?
S34: A. and Si. Said that=
Si35: =We said on the truth that=
S36: =On the truth, that it’s their truth^, to look at that (on the shadows in the cavern)=
G37: =So, they are not open to ideas of another truth=
Si38: Yeh, it’s as if they [. . .]
S39: They are enlightened and they are not enlightened
G40: We are wise
S41: But what does is mean to interpret the story?
G42: This is exactly what you just did

Big ideas appear in bold text. Conjectures appear in bold italic text. The conversation is about a text. It is not guided. However, one can notice the active engagement of all students. They try to follow the thread of conversation (G10, S22, G28, B33). Also, they appraise each other for their ideas (B14, G15, G21, S27, S27). They have clearly adopted dialogical norms. Big questions engendered conjectures and new questions, and the conclusions they reached together completely fitted the Platonic outside world of ideas (with the help of The Matrix). The “we are wise” in G40 perfectly matches the emblematic ambiance of a conversation of thinkers about the allegory of the Cave. Conversations in the third cycle were about various topics but had the same characteristics (variety of big questions, subsequent conjecturing, and dialogic norms).

Conclusions

The present chapter opens new perspectives about a new culture of questioning that can develop in long-term courses. Questioning was a recurring practice enacted in its open and meaningful manifestations, in conjunction with hypothesizing/conjecturing. Also, the questioning functioned in a snowball effect, questions very often engendering new questions, by such opening myriads of doors in a place where one could originally see a wall only. Such phenomena hint that the objective of this course in humanities was attained—the constitution of a community of philosophical inquiry. We presented samples of discussions that showed the flourishing of questioning in the context of discussions in small groups or in a whole classroom forum. This communal development cannot prevent the analysis of the trajectories of participation (Ludvigsen et al., 2011) of all students in the consecutive activities of the course. This analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the pedagogical approach presented here suggests an interesting model for turning students to questioners in a world in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar and the certain develops into doubtful.

References


