

PHILOSOPHY FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Brother Enrique García Ahumada

We offer this article as the author's own pedagogical experience. As a teacher of philosophy for high school students in schools located in disadvantaged areas of Santiago, Chile, he tackled the challenge of producing materials adapted to their culture and their means.

This article was published in the Chilean Pedagogical Review/1994 and it was sent to us by the author.

Since 1993 the teaching of philosophy in schools funded and staffed by the Brothers in La Florida and in La Granja contrasts with the author's long experience in other schools where tuition is charged in different areas.

The student population

In the area of La Granja, the students come from a type of culture that we might call "normal", in the sense that it is tied to economic, recreational, personal, family and religious interests. (1) They show a clear family tradition of ethical values with a Catholic foundation, although their participation in church on Sunday is almost nil. A significant minority of 3rd and 4th year students have already had several summer jobs. Some have held jobs during part or all of the school year, some on weekends and some on weekday afternoons. They often help out in small businesses, in supermarkets or in open-air markets. Very little reading is done at home; there are seldom any magazines, at best, a Sunday newspaper. "La Cuarta", the most popular magazine sold at the local kiosk at the market in San Gregorio, and the only reading material seen in the hands of passengers of Line 2 at the metropolitan railroad station.

In the area of La Florida there is a better level of schooling among the parents and this shows in the attitude that their children have toward studies. They are eager to obtain good grades, a rare thing in the La Granja area where many students shrug their shoulders

and joke about the poor grades they are earning. On the contrary, in La Florida there are students who read books and magazines on their own initiative.

In both places the capacity for sustained attention is low and is attributable to the daily habit of listening to music and watching television. This requires a diversification of strategies when teaching. Respect for the teacher does not in itself inhibit a certain jovial spirit of interrupting when an explanation is being given. Their vocabulary is limited, their handwriting leaves much to be desired. This is due to poor reading habits and for the excessive use of multiple choice exams given by the teachers which do not require any writing. In La Granja there is very little skill in the use of the dictionary partly because the school library does not offer much training in this skill.

Many teachers do not use textbooks because their cost is beyond what a family would be able to afford, but some do use some parts of texts which the students then photocopy. The classes that require a lot of writing in notebooks from dictation or copied from the blackboard make for a passive and tedious discipline.

The role of the textbook

Textbooks on philosophy that are available in the marketplace, many of them imported, are relatively lengthy and expensive and they employ language that is usually not explained.

This year for the first time I found an entire class of students who said that they were incapable of understanding a chapter (on Descartes) that they were given to read in pairs along with a corresponding worksheet. Actually the textbook given to the students in the fourth year by the school, while it is simpler than the imported books, does assume a certain ability for reading comprehension and some familiarity with a basic philosophical vocabulary. Even reformulating the study guide contained in the book rather than discussing its implications did not improve the situation much.

Beginning with the next class I came with notes that were designed appropriately. The previous year my experience taught me to make up my own notes since there were no appropriate textbooks for the third year. These notes were published in an experimental edition by the De La Salle publishing company.

The chief benefit of a manual for these students is to maintain a sequence of brief, clear, coherent and relevant instructions that will give some meaning to the philosophical discussions during the year, eliminating the need for them to take notes during the teacher's lecture and thereby avoiding the need for the teacher to have to wait while they compose their personal notes as they listen to the class lecture.

The written document contains a summary of the content. Each topic is no more than one page in length

and it is often divided into sub-topics. Sentences should be short and compound structures should be avoided, especially those using subordinate clauses. Concentration is aided by the use of underlining, numbers and quotation marks. Each chapter includes a Study Guide which is designed in such a way as to foster a detailed reading comprehension. Variety is achieved by means of boxes to foster personal reflection (not evaluated) and group work. Reading guides have been added for a group of novels for young people the Erich Fromm's "The Art of Loving".

Expressive apprenticeship

The great amount of freedom that is permitted today by national programs give rise to the fostering of a personal type of training than simply erudite information. The drawing up of the manual for the fourth year, not planned at the beginning of the year, is now just beginning. It is enough here to just describe the content and the method of the third year manual.

The first part presents the "Personality Development" needed by all children. Made up of five chapters, the first one confronts a certain lazy attitude towards studies and it explains why and how one should study. The dislike for academics by students of La Granja, who do not consider study as a way to climb the socio-economic ladder, gave rise to the first paragraph, which is: "Self-esteem, a necessary condition for learning". The second chapter deals with personality development in five paragraphs concerning incentives, motivation, needs and self-realization. The third chapter explains interpersonal communication and communication with God with one paragraph about "The changing nature of things". The fourth chapter speaks of public communication including "artistic expression". The fifth chapter outlines "family relationships" with seven paragraphs about youth and adult sexuality.

The second part, "Ethical Orientation of the Personality", suggests a second type of discussion on the philosophical character with regard to the psychological topics developed in the first part. A chapter on the "Fundamentals of Ethics" raises questions for small and large groups in six experiences for young people in order to discover some universal moral principles: "Self-awareness", "The dignity of the person", "Suffering", "Group relationships", "Friendship", "Transcendence". The last chapter, dealing with

"Ethical systems" besides raising "The ethical problem" and distinguishing "Human acts and acts of mankind" also addresses "Utilitarianism", "Positive ethics", "Natural rationalism", "The formal ethic", and "Axiology or ethical values" in order to help each group and each student to deal with such positions using the results of their previous discussions.

The reading of the "Prohibited age" by Torcuato Luca de Tena and "Grace and the Stranger" by Guillermo Blanco compliment the literary study done in the Spanish language course with a guided ethical analysis.

Observed Results

With the given advantage of the La Florida students over those from La Granja in terms of their use of vocabulary, intellectual fluency and in the collecting of information, it was observed that in all of them there was a constant interest in discussing the topics (although not so much in memorizing the theories) and a friendly and lively tone manifest in active discussions of the small groups. This contrasted with the more serious tone of those who participated in the large groups. These discussions on topics learned from experience have been very well understood and significant in the study of the respective theory. They considered "The Art of Loving" to be very difficult but they responded well via the Study Guide which helped them to show a good understanding of the thesis. The increase in self-esteem and in the ability to reflect was very evident in all. Grading took into account separately the ability of the groups and the acquired theoretical knowledge, which while not as noticeable as the increase in self-esteem, did merit in almost all the students a grade of good or very good for a significant minority.

Notes:

- (1) See my article "Approaching the culture of an entire class", *Revista de Pedagogía*, XLII-360 (Sept.-Oct. 1993) 221-225.
- (2) Ana ESCRIBAR WIKS, "Elementos de Filosofía, 4th year". Santiago, Editorial Universitaria 4, 1991 (1984), 96 pages.