

'Pre-college philosophy for philosophy's sake: a Dutch perspective'

[Dennis de Gruijter \[bio\]](#)

Dennis de Gruijter (1978) is a philosopher, author, high school teacher, and teacher trainer from Gouda, The Netherlands, where he also hosts the local philosophy café. He is the founder of the Dutch Philosophy Olympiad and has authored a book on the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. He is currently writing on pessimism and depression. Dennis can be reached at info@stadsfilosoofgouda.nl.

Abstract

There is a growing interest in doing philosophy in pre-college education. Liberal democratic governments praise the civic virtues of doing philosophy; universities praise the acquired academic skills. In this paper I will discuss Dutch pre-college philosophy as an example of doing philosophy for its own sake and argue that academia should improve its Socratic impulse by being involved with high school philosophy.

Introduction

In this paper I would like to discuss pre-college philosophy in The Netherlands, why I describe it as 'philosophy for philosophy's sake', and how pre-college philosophy has the potential to stimulate the Socratic impulse of academic philosophy. It would go beyond the restrictions of this submission to take up a greater comparative perspective, so I hope the audience will decide for their selves to what degree the situation differs or resembles that of their own country, and whether that is actually a good thing or not.

I. Philosophy in pre-college education

Since Matthew Lipman's (1923 – 2010) groundbreaking work on doing philosophy with children, or *P4C*, interest in and appreciation for philosophy in the primary classroom has consistently grown. However, there seems to be less consideration for pre-college philosophy with young adults. While many states offer their students courses on ethics, world religions or civics the subject of philosophy as a discipline in and of itself and occupied with its own questions, seems much more rare.

Lipman started the *P4C* project out of dissatisfaction with the reasoning skills of his students at Columbia University. Justified by the belief that abstract and logical reasoning are innate human capabilities, Lipman introduced philosophy in the Montclair Public Schools in New Jersey with the direct aim to stimulate and improve children's reasoning skills. Other educators latched on to the project by demonstrating that doing philosophy was also beneficial to liberal democratic consciousness. Both academia *and* society seemed to benefit and today the improvement of both academic and civic virtues are the primary justifications for doing pre-college philosophy.

The benefits, however, confront us with a problem, as those who fill up the contents of the curriculum naturally gravitate towards their own biased views on what society and academia should be, especially when they consider the virtues that are necessary for the social and political upkeep. Without a more fundamental ethical justification of education in general we run the risk of indoctrinating the young. In the clear words of R. Graham Oliver,

*'The justification [for education] must respect the adult right to self-determination, but apply this to the person from their most vulnerable and dependent beginnings.'*¹

Now the obvious objection will be that these notions of rights and self-determination are themselves biased and therefore indoctrinating. While it may be impossible to completely remove any form of prejudice from education, it is possible to set up a curriculum that respects philosophy for its own sake as a way to allow the student to explore questions and decide which are meaningful to her. I would illustrate this by using Dutch pre-college philosophy as an example.

II. The Dutch Perspective

In The Netherlands, the former Society for Philosophy Education (*Vereniging voor Filosofie Onderwijs*, or VFO) was founded in the early 1970's with the aim to introduce philosophy into the high school curriculum. In 1974 the first unofficial philosophy examination took place and was the start for other schools to do the same. Since then there has been a steady growth of participating schools and with the last count in 2007 there were 242.² In 1974 there were thirteen pupils doing philosophy. In 2007 there were 3662.³ There are no official figures for 2018, but as yet there seems to be no evidence of decline.

The (new) Dutch Society for Philosophy Teachers in Secondary Education⁴ (VFVO) has not taken academic and civic benefits as the sole *raison d'être* of the curriculum, although it regards them as beneficial side-effects. It remains fully committed to the Socratic creed

¹ <https://whatiseducationhq.com/articles/justification-of-education/>

² In 2015 there were 642 high schools in the Netherlands. Due to a low birth rate this number might become a bit less in the coming years.

³ <http://www.vfvo.nl/filosofie-als-schoolvak.php#sdfootnote15sym>

⁴ Vereniging van Filosofiedocenten in het Voortgezet Onderwijs, or VFVO

that we do not teach students *what* to think, but *how* to think – to practice philosophy in and of itself. The curriculum entails a distinct program of five disciplines: Epistemology, Philosophy of Science, Ethics, Anthropology, Social Philosophy, and core skills such as writing an essay, participating in Socratic dialogue, and training in logical and deliberative reasoning.

Whereas the State Department of Education has a strong grip on other subjects, Philosophy has a more privileged status. The curriculum is more or less constructed at the discretion of the teachers, choosing books, texts, philosophers, excursions, input, etc. provided that they position their selves within the five mentioned disciplines.

Furthermore, about 20% of the curriculum is freed up for the individual teacher to fill up with any philosophical interest not covered by the curriculum. For instance, in the past years I have used this space to explore Franz Kafka, deep reading skills, history of phenomenology, New Atheism, Greek tragedy, Spinozist psychotherapy, philosophy of nature, existentialism, and Stoic Week⁵.

In addition to this freedom Philosophy has ‘globalized’ the content of the curriculum. It prescribes what should be done, but not how. For example, students must study the mind-body problem or deontology and consequentialism, but the teacher is free to choose which philosophers she will pick in her pursuit of the subject matter. There is only a small list of philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Foucault, that the Department requires to be studied.

In summary, the Dutch philosophy curriculum both guides the content and frees the teacher to decide on how to have her students approach

⁵ <http://modernstoicism.com/about-stoic-week/>

this matter. Doing so allows the teacher to do philosophy for the sake of philosophy, avoids indoctrination as much as possible, and allows differentiation in local interest and cognitive capacity. Another consequence is that the teacher *must* actively reflect on her own practice as both educator and philosopher and justify her decisions to present the curriculum in the way that she does. It opens up space for the problematic nature of knowledge and a fertile discussion between teachers.

III. The Socratic impulse

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1907 – 1977) sketches the problematic nature of human existence in three distinct, but related areas: politics, history, and philosophy. These are combined in the arena that emerged with the Greek polis and was exemplified in the figure of Socrates. This arena is the struggle for meaning and freedom that is not passively received, as in mythology or ideology, but actively pursued for its own sake, without ever providing a sense of closure to the questions we carry with us as both a burden and possibility. I have been doing this teaching gig for ten years now, and I am unafraid to claim that our educational institutions are the *intersections* of history, politics, and philosophy.

This seems to be especially true of our high schools: young people are exploring the edges of their horizons yet fearful to leave safety behind; trying out new ideas yet defensive about the internalized morals of their parents; exploring their world and themselves as a source of pleasure as well as pain; wrestling with responsibility, truth, and meaning. There is seldom a more opportune moment to wake the Socratic impulse in a person!

Many pupils who study pre-college philosophy start to complain about the lack of reflection in their other courses. They experience some sense of control by questioning teachers but can't seem to escape the framework of positive, given answers. Knowledge can be questioned but seldom becomes questionable; teachers can respond but they seldom become responsive and responsible. Sometimes pupils at my school become irritable because they discover that reality is very complicated and our perspectives limited, but that non-philosophy courses offer their knowledge as if the world is profoundly unproblematic. While students often push back against the unproblematic, at other times it is a welcome refuge when questions become especially hard.

To make the Socratic impulse not only visible, but extend and stimulate it for the high school students as well, the Society of Philosophy Teachers in Secondary Education (VFVO) works with several other organizations. For example, every two years the Dutch Spinozalens Foundation⁶ presents an international philosopher with an award. High school students are invited to talk with the awardee. Also, The Netherlands has an official Philosopher Laureate, and every year up to fourteen pre-college students are elected Young Philosophers Laureate, providing comments and reflection on public issues from their perspectives.

And since 2012 The Netherlands organizes the Dutch Philosophy Olympiad, hosting the 25th edition of the annual International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO) in Rotterdam, 2017.⁷ There were 45 participating countries. Again, the academic, civic, and (by virtue of its international character) cosmopolitical benefits can be used as the justifications for

⁶ <http://www.spinozalens.nl/en>

⁷ <http://ipo2017.nl/>

the IPO's existence. But I would argue that here, as well, doing philosophy for the sake of philosophy is the foundational justification. The theme of the IPO 2017 was 'Tolerance', and while this is an important liberal democratic virtue, tolerance was never presented as desirable or unproblematic. Through various lectures, exercises, and projects participants were encouraged to question the idea rather than subscribing to an ideal.

In summary, pre-college philosophy as a subject might be justified for its academic and civic benefits, but doing it for its own sake offers many new roads and opportunities to involve young adults into questioning everything freely and develop their own new perspectives on meaning.

In concluding this contribution I would like to argue that doing philosophy this way offers new ways for academia to reflect on their own justification, practice, and meaning. We have a natural instinct to ask what high school should offer the university but we rarely turn this question around: ask not what you can do for the university, ask what the university can do for you.

For a few years the Dutch Philosophy Olympiad has extended invitations to universities to provide a thematic program. Some have been more enthusiastic than others, because making their own projects accessible and meaningful to young adults in high school is challenging and requires a lot of creativity. The culture and environment are quite different from the campus. Through the years we have seen that high school students can question professors in ways they are not used to. This is not as bad as it sounds. We have seen the Socratic impulse in the hotel lobby where professors or lecturers are surrounded by pupils actively arguing points from the workshops or lectures, often until late into the night, and then rising early to write their philosophy essays

within the space of a few hours. As you might expect, since we started in 2012 we have not yet received any complaints from either students or professors.

Pre-college philosophy students are often caught in what Peter Abbs calls 'the fallacy of Catoism', after the elder Cato who argued against the introduction of Greek ideas into Roman culture:

"The fallacy [...] concerns the displacement of the notion of practicality on to every possible kind of human activity... Under Catoism the vast range of human experience and potentiality is subjected to only one question: *what use is it?* [Its] effect is always to reduce, to cut down, to level.'⁸

But this fallacy is surely recognizable to academic philosophers as well. Just as our pre-college philosophers should break through this fallacy by playing hardball for philosophy for philosophy's sake without regards for the benefits, so should our academic philosophers improve the Socratic impulse for freedom, meaning, and truth for its own sake. In this aim high school and universities can and should find and invigorate one another.

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⁸ Abbs, Peter, *The Educational Imperative*, Falmer Press, 1994, p. 7