Using the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach to facilitate discussions in higher education classrooms: insights from educators' collaborative reflections

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Using the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach to facilitate discussions in higher education classrooms: insights from educators' collaborative reflections

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Abstract

This article explores the role of Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy in higher education tutors' facilitation of discussion-based learning (DBL). To reflect on their use of P4C, six teacher education tutors who taught on a first-year professional learning module took part in a professional development activity. Questionnaire and group discussion data from three participants were analysed using the 'Discipline of Noticing' approach. Key themes in the tutors' reflections included the social and emotional dimensions of DBL, questioning strategies, and expectations of students' capabilities. The findings highlight the complexities of embedding high-quality DBL in higher education and demonstrate how P4C can be a powerful tool for noticing, reflecting on, and evaluating discussion facilitation strategies.

Keywords: discussion-based learning; facilitation; philosophy for children; professional development; teacher education.

Introduction

There is broad agreement that discussion-based learning (DBL) fosters deeper, more authentic learning than traditional teaching methods (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005;

Skidmore and Murakami, 2016; Teo, 2019; García-Carrión et al., 2020). DBL encourages students to articulate their thoughts, refine their ideas, and consider diverse perspectives. In this study, DBL mainly refers to whole class discussions where students express their ideas and collaboratively reason and reflect on each other's perspectives. DBL exemplifies socio-cultural perspectives that emphasise social interactions as a prerequisite for language and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1798). Pedagogical approaches based on this theory incorporate cooperative, active and collaborative learning activities (Fry et al., 2009; Teo, 2019).

Despite its benefits, the social dimension of DBL is often overlooked in student learning research (Jacques and Salmon, 2007; Engin, 2016). Classroom approaches tend to prioritise active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning and small group activities (Yew and Goh, 2016), but rarely consider the social and emotional aspects, such as fear of being judged (Jacques and Salmon, 2007; Lornecová et al., 2019). Many students report that low confidence (Hardman, 2016) and difficulty articulating their ideas (Sudwan, 2022) hinder their participation. Additionally, tutors' reliance on didactic approaches such as Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) can also undermine effective DBL (Hardman, 2016; Khong et al., 2019). As Dallimore et al. (2010, p.104), caution, 'it is one thing to recognize the benefits of engaging students in discussion yet quite another to master the skills necessary to effectively facilitate discussion'.

This paper explores a professional development activity using the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach in a first-year module. P4C is a structured, inquiry-based, dialogic approach commonly used in schools (Lipman, 2003; Lord et al., 2021). While the participating tutors were familiar with P4C, none had previously applied it in a higher education (HE) context. The study aimed to assess P4C's impact on the pedagogy of DBL and to highlight insights gained from its implementation. This paper, therefore, explores the following research question: what are tutors' experiences of using the Philosophy for Children approach in discussion-based learning (DBL) contexts?

Following an overview of DBL's pedagogical potential and challenges, the paper discusses the tutor's role, the rationale for adopting P4C as a pedagogy for DBL in teacher education, and the study's methodology and findings. The conclusion argues that beyond

serving as a pedagogical tool in HE, P4C's holistic framework (Table 2) offers a powerful reflective tool for analysing and evaluating tutors' DBL practices.

Throughout this paper, 'discussion-based learning' (DBL) and 'classroom discussion' will be used interchangeably to refer to small-group HE classrooms (up to 30 students). Similarly, the terms 'tutor', 'educator', and 'teacher' all refer to the discussion group leader.

Literature review

Discussion-based learning

Discussion-based learning (DBL) is a widely used teaching and learning approach in many HE disciplines that enables students to interact with others to clarify ideas, explore their thinking in depth, and relate what they learn to their own knowledge and experience (Fry et al., 2009). Based on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, DBL involves the 'questioning, interrogation and negotiation of ideas and opinions' that ideally take place in an 'intellectually rigorous, yet mutually respectful, manner' (Teo, 2019, p.170). By listening to others, giving reasons, and questioning one's own and others' assumptions, learners develop new perspectives (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Khong et al., 2019; Heron et al., 2023) and cultivate crucial skills such as critical thinking, judgement, and communication competencies essential for 21st-century life (Fry et al., 2009; Teo, 2019).

DBL is integral to initial teacher education programmes in the UK where students are encouraged to 'systematically inquire into learning' (Loughran and Berry, 2005, p.194). Discussions help them to grapple with dilemmas, critically examine their assumptions and 'seek out additional perspectives to ultimately acquire new knowledge, attitudes, and skills in light of these reflections' (Meyers, 2008, p.219). This strengthens the link between theory and practice so that the 'relationship between knowing and doing might be more accessible' (Loughran and Berry, 2005, p.194). Moreover, DBL enables future educators to critically evaluate 'best practices', ensuring they can adapt teaching strategies to different contexts and make informed judgements about resources and/or approaches to teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Philpott, 2014; Sahlberg et al., 2014).

DBL also encourages learners to reflect more deeply on problematic and contestable educational concepts (such as diversity, professionalism, and authority) by examining how these ideas are defined and operationalised in the classroom (Gay and Kirkland, 2003; García-Carrión et al., 2022). Moreover, learning through dialogue prepares student teachers to foster reasoning, critical thinking, and empathy in their future pupils (Lipman, 2003; Rosenzweig, 2017).

Barriers to effective DBL

Despite its potential, many students (including student teachers), nonetheless, fail to fully benefit from DBL (e.g., developing reasoned judgement, critical thinking), even though they enjoy and value discussion-based seminars (Lorencová et al., 2019). Research has shown that students' views of tutors as experts rather than facilitators of dialogue (Demissie, 2020), combined with language confidence (Engin, 2016) and uncertainty about their role in DBL (van der Meer, 2012), can impact engagement.

Tutors also face challenges in facilitating effective classroom discussions. Pressure to 'cover' curriculum content (Gunn, 2007; Hardman, 2016) encourages didactic pedagogies, typified by Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005; Khong et al., 2019). IRF, characterised by teachers' closed questions and student answers that are 'often brief and simply evaluated on their appropriateness by the teacher' (Hardman, 2019, p.2) can restrict opportunities to critique academic concepts, question societal issues relevant to the discipline, and engage in democratic discourse (Nixon, 2011). In conclusion, despite DBL's potential to enhance student learning, the cognitive and social/emotional needs of students, and overuse of IRF approaches can limit meaningful discussion and engagement.

Philosophy for Children (P4C)

The Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy is a democratic, person-centred, inquiry-based approach widely used in school contexts (Splitter and Sharp, 1995; Lipman, 2003; Echeverria and Hannam, 2016). Influenced by Deweyan ideals (1933), it aims to improve pupils' thinking holistically, promoting 'accurate, consistent, and coherent thinking' that is also 'ampliative, imaginative and creative' (Lipman, 2003, p.2).

Unlike popular perspectives that emphasise critical thinking only (Ennis, 2015), P4C accords equal status to the cognitive (critical) and affective (caring) dimensions of thinking, within a community of inquiry (Lipman, 1988; Sharp, 2014). A defining feature is its focus on contestable philosophical concepts (e.g., inclusion, curriculum) and the 4Cs – critical, caring, creative, and collaborative thinking – to foster a strong community of enquiry (Table 2). Additionally, P4C's structured pedagogy ensures a shared understanding of its aims, values, and processes for both students and educators (Table 1).

A supporting and non-judgemental learning environment is crucial for P4C discussions. A first step is the setting of the ground rules that the students suggest and agree on (SAPERE, 2010). A distinctive aspect of the pedagogy is that students generate the discussion question, though tutors can offer guidance if needed. Questions are typically generated in groups, and in line with P4C's democratic principles, participants vote for their preferred question. The discussion starts with 'first thoughts' followed by an exploration of contested concepts through the 4Cs of thinking – critical, creative, collaborative, and caring thinking (Table 2).

Table 1. The P4C methodology (SAPERE, 2010).

1. Ground rules: to establish the caring/collaborative ethos.
2. Presentation of stimulus: to provoke interest and motivation.
3. Generating questions: to encourage curiosity about the stimulus.
4. Voting for a question: to establish the focus for the dialogue.
5. Airing questions: to clarify/explain questions and explore links between questions.
6. First thoughts: to share initial responses.
7. Building dialogue: to delve deeper, question, challenge and give examples/counterexamples.
8. Last thoughts: to reflect on the question, the process and the discussion.

The facilitator's role is central to a successful inquiry. Unlike highly didactic approaches, the facilitator acts as a questioner rather than an expert, 'possessing great store of

information' (Lipman, 1988, p.103). They are trained to guide the dialogue using the 4Cs (critical, caring, collaborative, creative thinking; Table 2) to prompt students to question assumptions, justify their views, and explore other perspectives. For example, if someone makes an unjustified assertion, the facilitator might ask how do we know that? Or does everyone agree? Knowledge of P4C principles and the 4Cs (Table 1; Table 2) therefore can equip tutors to make 'more complicated interventions in relation to the psychodynamic aspects and conceptual aspects of the argument' (Kennedy, 2004, p.753).

The review of the literature highlights both the benefits and the challenges of incorporating DBL in HE contexts and P4C's role in helping tutors facilitate richer, more inclusive discussions.

Table 2. Four modes of thinking (SAPERE, 2010).

Caring	Collaborative	Critical	Creative
Listening, valuing, e.g., showing interest in others' experiences and values	Responding and supporting, e.g., building on each other's ideas	Questioning, reasoning, e.g., seeking meaning, evidence, distinctions, judgements	Connecting, suggesting, e.g., providing examples, comparisons, criteria, alternative explanations

Methodology, context, and participants

The study uses the Discipline of Noticing (DoN) methodology; a qualitative research approach that facilitates critical reflection on one's practice through collaborative enquiry. DoN prioritises acts of 'noticing' what is important and valuable and problematic, to encourage 'drawing back from immediate practice', and enabling teachers to see things they have previously overlooked or have become habituated to, by selecting and focusing on 'what can be changed, recognising choices (alternative perspectives), labelling (interpreting, seeking themes) and validating (informing practice)' (Mason, 2002, p.6).

Context

The study took place in a teacher education department of an English university. The students (approximately 150) were in their first year of study and undertaking a BA primary teacher education course. They were mostly taught in seminars and workshops in class sizes of up to 30 students. Over the course of the first semester, all module tutors used the P4C pedagogy in five sessions within a professional learning module focused on preparing students for school placements. The rationale for using P4C was to encourage deeper engagement with some of the key concepts in the module: group work, professionalism, curriculum, behaviour management, and teacher presence. Before the start of the academic year, all teaching staff completed a four-hour course on the principles and practice of P4C (SAPERE, 2010).

The professional development activity

The aim of the professional development activity was to trial and reflect on the use of the P4C pedagogy in seminars to address the module teaching teams' concerns about students' reluctance to engage in classroom discussion (Demissie, 2015). As the lead P4C tutor, Farzana sourced the stimuli (Table 1) and potential community building (ice-breaking) activities. In the first seminar, each tutor briefly explained the P4C approach and aims, established ground rules, and introduced the stimuli and the remaining steps (Table 1). After voting for their preferred question, the students shared their first thoughts and as the discussion progressed, they were encouraged to refine their responses e.g., through examples and counterexamples, clarifying statements, and saying whether they agree/disagree and why. Each seminar concluded with students sharing their last thoughts and evaluation of the session (Table 1).

All six module tutors participated in the professional development activity and attended two, one-hour reflective discussion sessions. The discussions enabled tutors to categorise experiences, seek alternative interpretations of key incidents, and validate and inform practice (the latter, in terms of a conference presentation and for personal development reviews) (Mason, 2002). The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

However, the data in this study is based on the three tutors – Farzana, Jess, and Karen (pseudonyms) – who had completed consent forms and collaboratively authored the paper. The project was granted ethical approval by the university's research committee to ensure compliance with anonymity and confidentiality (BERA, 2018). In the final reflective meeting, the three participants/authors reviewed their respective examples of noticing (Farzana, Karen, and Jess) to discuss significant incidents, interpretations, and reflections. The data also included a post-intervention evaluation (Table 3).

Findings

This section presents data on tutors' experiences of using the Philosophy for Children approach in discussion-based learning (DBL) contexts: the social and emotional dimension of DBL (Karen), approaches to tutor questioning (Jess), and assumptions about students' capabilities (Farzana). All three are linked to essential aspects of P4C pedagogy and practice (SAPERE, 2010), and to elements of successful classroom discussion.

Effective facilitation and classroom dynamics

Karen's reflections focused on the classroom environment and facilitation strategies. At the beginning of the session, tutors established ground rules, a core feature of P4C methodology that fosters inquiry within a caring and collaborative learning community (Lipman, 2003) (Table 2). Crucially, P4C encourages facilitators to involve students in suggesting and negotiating ground rules, ensuring that expectations are democratically established and adaptable if necessary (SAPERE, 2010).

However, during one discussion, a student laughed out loud after another student had spoken, despite a ground rule that stated, 'Don't laugh when others speak'. Karen recalled how, initially, she was uncertain how to respond, but decided to remind the group, 'Remember one of our ground rules is don't laugh'. In response, the student stated, 'Well I don't feel comfortable with that cause it's humorous and it's funny'. The issue remained unsettled with the student not taking part in any more discussions.

The example illustrates how a relational pedagogy such as P4C can prompt educators to notice and reflect on the social and emotional aspect of DBL that can be missed or considered unimportant (Jacques and Salmon, 2007). By noticing and *accounting-for* (explaining) her experiences and collaboratively *interpreting* the incident, Karen was beginning to reconsider her facilitation approach (Mason, 2002), 'I had kind of imposed that (the ground rule) and maybe I shouldn't'.

It is possible that Karen and the student had different perceptions of the incident and perhaps, what was said was indeed humorous and funny to the student. Nonetheless, Karen faced the challenge of maintaining a respectful and inclusive learning environment for all participants. Karen's experience is insightful because it draws attention to the importance of considering social and emotional dimensions in the facilitation of DBL in contrast to much of HE pedagogical literature that prioritises the cognitive aspects of DBL (Ashton and Stone, 2021).

Questioning for effective facilitation

Jess focused on the role of questioning during the P4C sessions. Although Jess had no previous P4C experience, she had an academic interest in developing students' critical thinking. In P4C, the sensitive use of questions is a key tool for building dialogue (Lipman, 2003) (Table 1). Questions can be used, for example, to ask for evidence, 'How do we know that?'; make distinctions, 'What is the same and what is different?'; or seek criteria, 'Is that always true?'

After establishing the ground rules and introducing the stimuli, the students selected two questions: 'What does it mean to manage behaviour'? and, 'What is a safe and good learning environment?' (Table 1). Jess reflected on the differences in her questioning approach between the two sessions. In the first session, she realised that she asked too many questions echoing the IRF (Initiation, Response, Feedback) model of didactic classroom interaction (Walsh and Sattes, 2015). As a result, her questioning style was 'shutting down the discussion' and 'disrupting the flow'.

In the second session, however, she adapted her facilitation style. 'I just sat, and I waited for a number of people to give their initial thoughts and bounce off each other's ideas;

before I started asking any questions'. She recalled how, 'That worked a lot better, and we went a lot further so the concepts they got on to were the big ones that led the students to question their prior assumptions and beliefs'.

By making a simple shift from what Jess described as a 'barrage of questions' to listening more and asking fewer questions, Jess created a space for fruitful DBL, where students were:

> Beginning to develop a more nuanced understanding of behaviour management because they were analysing and interrogating assumptions and beliefs behind key concepts, and questioning taken-for-granted views about consistency in behaviour management and reflecting on the meaning and implications of the concept of consistency in different contexts

Jess's account highlights how attention to the quality of questions, something that Jess had not previously planned for, improved the quality of dialogue. Whilst her increased confidence in using the P4C approach may have contributed to this shift, it is also possible that the structured approach of noticing, accounting for, and interpreting her experience enabled her to refine her questioning style, leading her to act more intentionally and non-habitually (Mason, 2002).

Beliefs and expectations about students' capabilities

Farzana's reflection related to an underlying principle of the P4C pedagogy rather than the P4C methodology itself. In P4C, students and learners are seen as capable and that their experiences are valuable sources of insight (Lipman, 2003). The context of Farzana's reflection was a seminar exploring the concept of group work based on the students' chosen question 'How do you get everyone to participate equally and should you?' (Table 1).

Farzana recalled how as the students grappled with the question, they quickly identified 'fairness' as a contestable concept. After an emerging consensus that everyone should contribute equally, one student challenged this by introducing the idea of *fair share*, suggesting that fairness might be better understood as matching contributions to individual resources and capabilities. This challenge prompted the group to reconsider their initial assumptions, leading some students to re-evaluate their original positions.

Farzana noted her surprise at the quality of the students' questions and contributions, stating, 'The level of dialogue was not what I expected from first year students in their first week of university'. The collaborative reflection led to discussions on whether pedagogical and assessment models in HE underestimate students' capacity for critical thinking and reflection (Forehand, 2010). This insight is important, as deficit models of student capabilities can create barriers to effective DBL. Research suggests that low expectations can reinforce and entrench educators' assumptions about students (Roberts-Holmes and Kitto, 2019) and lead to less rigorous curricula (Rubie-Davies, 2007).

Overall, systemising the collaborative reflection allowed the tutors to engage in critical professional learning. Karen reconsidered her approach to ground rule setting, Jess adapted her questioning style, and Farzana reconsidered her assumptions about first-year university students. This illustrates Mason's (2002, p.6) argument that structured reflection enhances the potential for professional change and transformation by enabling educators to act 'non-habitually and professionally'.

Discussion

This study explored the question, 'What are tutors' experiences of using the Philosophy for Children approach in discussion-based learning (DBL) contexts?' Overall, tutors valued P4C's underpinning principles, its impact on students, and potential to shape future practice (Table 3). In each case, the experience challenged habitual ways of acting and thinking and through the collaborative reflections revealed new possibilities for pedagogical change.

For example, Jess's reflection on her 'barrage of questions' showed an awareness of how effective questioning could impact on classroom discussions (Moon, 2007). Karen's reconsideration of her imposed ground rule, 'I had kind of imposed that (the ground rule) and maybe I shouldn't', highlighted the power dynamics in HE classrooms, whilst Farzana's reflection challenged her assumptions about students' capabilities and readiness to engage in DBL.

The findings suggest that the DBL context is complex and multi-layered, with implications for the role of the educator (Dallimore, 2010). If students are concerned about the safety of the learning environment (Jacques and Salmon, 2007) or are passive participants in the discussion (van der Meer, 2012), their participation, engagement and learning could be compromised (Engin, 2016). Furthermore, the quality of facilitators' questioning is also critical (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005). For trainee teachers, in particular, skilful questioning and reflective dialogue enables them to engage with contestable concepts in both subject content and pedagogy (Philpott, 2014; Rosenzweig, 2017). Similarly, deficit-based perceptions of students' capabilities can impact on tutors' expectations of students, resulting in an overuse of IRF type of interaction (Rubie-Davies, 2007; Hardman, 2008). In sum, effective facilitation requires a delicate balance (Green, 2016) between content and process, questioning, as well as 'listening, examining, qualifying, challenging, explaining, and elaborating' (Jacques and Salmon, 2007, p.186).

The data also suggests that the success of DBL depends on tutors intentionally creating the ideal conditions for learning (Sedova et al., 2016) and using the relevant skills to facilitate DBL effectively (Lipman, 2003). Pedagogical approaches in HE literature, however, rarely focus on facilitation practices, instead emphasising students' cognitive growth and development (Misseyanni et al., 2018). At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggests while tutors understand the importance of providing high quality DBL experiences, they lack the necessary tools and strategies. Even the UK professional teaching standards for new lecturers does not explicitly address effective discussion facilitation (AdvanceHE, 2011).

As a dialogic, inquiry-based approach that values the cognitive and affective factors equally (Table 2), Philosophy for Children (P4C) has the potential to be a valuable professional development tool for effective DBL (Table 3). P4C incorporates elements of effective talk pedagogy, such as exploratory talk, dialogic teaching (Mercer and Dawes, 2008), and collaborative argumentation (Khong et al., 2019). By prompting tutors to notice and reflect on their facilitation practices, P4C can challenge existing DBL norms to foster pedagogical change. Intentional noticing of DBL practices can be a catalyst for professional growth, enabling the formation of new perspectives (Mason, 2002; Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Sachs, 2016).

For educators committed to high-quality DBL, P4C offers valuable insights and strategies. While formal P4C training can enhance its implementation (Table 1), elements of P4C can still be integrated into any DBL context. A key pre-requisite is the establishment/agreement of the ground rules. Tutors can then apply the think, commit, justify, and reflect framework, where students are offered a range of perspectives about a disciplinary topic, e.g., education. The tutor then invites them to select the one that most resonates with their experiences/reading, justify their choice, and collaboratively evaluate the choices and reasons through questioning assumptions, seeking evidence for their choices.

This approach could be used at the start of a class/module and/or at the end. Additionally, the 4Cs framework (Table 2) can be applied to assess the extent to which students are thinking critically, creatively, collaboratively, and caringly (Demissie, 2022). In summary, incorporating P4C principles into discussion-based learning presents an opportunity to enhance facilitation skills, deepen student engagement, and foster more meaningful dialogue. By encouraging tutors to notice, reflect, and adapt their practices, P4C can support more effective DBL in HE.

Table 3. Post-study evaluation questionnaire.

	Previous experience	Most appealing aspect	Insights about teaching	Insights about students	Future
Farzana	Extensive experience in P4C	Bring people together Societal need	Importance of listening Value of dialogue in learning	Surprising capability	Potential to integrate it throughout degree programme
Jess	No real experience	Clear structure Reassurance to the novice	Move away from safe option of PowerPoint/small group discussion	Transforming learning	Incorporate into all my modules

Karen	Used as methodology for master's research	Helped to get to know my group, listening to them	Insights about leading/managing discussions	Group dynamics and how to support	Develop over the course of the degree

Limitations

The study provided valuable insights into tutors' experiences and reflections on using the P4C approach to support their facilitation practice. However, there are several limitations to consider. Firstly, the study would have been strengthened by collecting data on tutors' perceptions of DBL prior to the professional development activity. This would have enabled a more in-depth evaluation of how their facilitation approaches evolved before and after engaging with P4C. Secondly, follow-up interviews could have provided deeper insights into whether the examples of noticing were due to the novelty of the P4C approach (Table 1) or tutors' previous experiences with DBL. Finally, while the study focused on tutors' reflections, incorporating students' perspectives on P4C in DBL contexts would enhance the validity and reliability of findings (Sudwan, 2022). Future research could explore students' experiences, examining the extent to which P4C influenced their engagement, critical thinking, and perception of dialogue-based learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine tutors' experiences of using the P4C pedagogy in DBL contexts. The findings highlight the social and emotional demands of DBL, the impact of tutor questioning, and the risks of deficit views about students' capabilities on facilitation practices. A key contribution of this study is its focus on tutors' lived experiences, offering insights into the complex factors that influence effective DBL facilitation. More broadly, the findings suggest that P4C can serve as both a framework for enriching DBL opportunities (Table 3) and a reflective tool for professional development. This paper contributes to the wider discussion on the challenges of DBL, the skills and

strategies tutors need to facilitate meaningful discussions, and the professional development required to enhance DBL practices in higher education.

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