

## Plain Vanilla Philosophical Inquiry (Philosophy for Children - P4C)

### Problem of Praxis (POP)

#### Overview

This P4C Inquiry protocol introduces students to a variety of **discussion-based inquiry** that are based on the theoretical foundations of Philosophy of Children (Jackson, 2001; Reed & Sharp, 1992). This can be used with students at any grade level and within any discipline. It seeks to develop **students' ability to think for themselves and to learn to use that ability in responsible, caring ways**. It is also an **active learning strategy** creating intellectually safe communities where philosophical inquiry can flourish. Participants are asked to actively gather information from a text, book, article, etc. and begin to ask qualitatively different sorts of questions; they persist in seeking to scratch beneath the surface of a text or lesson, or personal situation.

#### Procedure:

It begins by scaffolding students in their creation of an intellectually safe community of learners. Next students define terms like discussion and **"Plain Vanilla"** in order to make explicit the terminology and learning activities that will be used throughout the course of the year. Next, teachers will have to independently select the reading materials or resources that are appropriate for the context of their instruction and their students. With those materials the students will engage in "Plain Vanilla Discussions" where they will learn how to use a guided note taking sheet that helps them to self-assess and assess their peers in the areas of community and inquiry. Finally, students will be required to complete a formal reflection regarding the progress that their learning community has made in regards to its ability to function as a community and progress intellectually through critical and responsible inquiry. The assessment tools for the student reflections are included.

#### DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Gently Socratic (P4C) inquiry is **not about having a particular answer in mind beforehand**. It begins by developing a context within which **dialogue and inquiry unfold**. Certainly, classrooms must be physically safe places. For dialogue and inquiry to occur they must be emotionally and intellectually safe as well. An important detail relevant to intellectual safety is proper acknowledgment of the diversity of views that emerge in the course of various inquiries. The goal is not to persuade anyone to any particular answer, but rather for everyone to reach a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues involved and a greater ability to navigate among these complexities.

#### CREATING THE COMMUNITY

The most favorable configuration for developing a community is for the class, including the teacher, to sit in a circle, on the floor if appropriate. Unlike the more traditional configuration with students in rows, the circle allows all members of the community to make eye contact, to see each other. In the ensuing dialogue, participants are better able to hear what others are saying and also to see

how they are saying it; in other words, the facial expressions and mannerisms of those who are speaking. The circle also facilitates seeing the impact on each other of the interaction.

An early objective is to establish a protocol whereby students feel empowered to call on each other. One effective activity for accomplishing this is to create a "Community Ball" together as a way to give shape to what will become an inquiry community. This activity is effective with groups from kindergarten through university.

### Making a Community Ball

#### Materials needed:

- Empty cardboard paper towel core
- Skein of multicolored yarn
- One long piece of heavy-duty string for tying

Procedure: (You may watch this Youtube video [▶ Making a Community Ball with Dr. Toby Yos](#) )

1. Place the tie-string through the center of the paper towel core.
2. Wrap yarn from the skein around the paper towel core.
3. Hold on to the tie-string while pulling the yarn off the core. The tie-string must remain in the center of the yarn coil. Grasp both ends of the tie-string and tie them together securely, forming a bagel shape.
4. Cut through the yarn at the outer edge, creating a pom-pom ball.

The group sits in a circle. The teacher begins wrapping the yarn around the paper towel core, while the student next to her feeds the yarn from the skein. The teacher goes first, responding to a question or questions that each person in the circle will answer in turn. This/these question(s) can be anything the teacher thinks will draw out the children, such as, "What is your favorite food or music?" or "What do you like best about school?" When the teacher finishes speaking, she passes the cardboard to the student beside her, who begins to wrap and rap (!) as the teacher takes over feeding the yarn. This process - one person wrapping and speaking, and his neighbor feeding the yarn - continues until all have had the opportunity to speak.

Once the group has made the ball, the agreement is that the person with the ball is the speaker of the moment. That person, when finished, passes to whomever he or she wishes. One caveat is that if the ball comes to a person who has not asked to speak or does not wish to speak, she has the absolute right to pass. Another strategy is to introduce certain "magic words" that members of the community will use to facilitate the inquiry. The use of magic words has been effective in developing a safe place where inquiry can unfold in a non-threatening way. Children who are soft-spoken are encouraged to speak up when someone in the group says "SPLAT" (speak louder please). It's okay to say "IDUS" (I don't understand). And when several people are speaking at once,

"POPAAT" (please, one person at a time) works. The teacher and students can write these "words" on cards and display them for all to see as needed. Each group can, of course, develop its own set of words. Whatever words you use, they can be powerfully instrumental in developing a community where all members, rather than just the teacher share in the responsibility for moving an inquiry forward, and where the members share a common vocabulary with which to engage in this task.

### Magic Words

- SPLAT = Speak a little louder, please. SPLAT means that what a person said just barely got out of their mouth and then went 'splat' onto the floor. In other words, we need you to speak louder so we can hear you.
- IDUS = I don't understand. IDUS can empower students to be able to say when they don't understand. It has proven much easier for students to say IDUS than "I don't understand." Teachers find it encouraging when IDUS begins to show up in other content areas.
- POPAAT = Please, one person at a time. Once students learn that during inquiry time the group is very interested in what they have to say, they often all want to speak at the same time. POPAAT is effective in this context. When people start speaking out of turn, someone says POPAAT, which means that all must stop talking. The person holding the ball then continues.
- OMT = One more time. OMT is a request for the speaker to repeat what he has said.
- NQP = Next question, please.
- LMO = Let's move on.
- PBQ = Please be quiet.
- GOS = Going off subject. A group member can say GOS when the discussion is losing focus.

Once the teacher introduces the magic words, anyone may hold up a card or say the appropriate magic word. If the community seems bogged down in a topic and is not getting anywhere, someone may offer "LMO" to the community. At that moment, the community votes to see if the majority would indeed like to move on. If a minority still has interest in the topic, they can pursue it at a later time.

### CREATING AN INTELLECTUALLY SAFE COMMUNITY

As a community, discuss the following:

- As a group can we establish our own criteria for a discussion?
- What does it mean to belong to a community? In other words, how do you know that you are accepted and belong to a group of people? List as many examples as you can regarding what makes a community.
- What communities do you belong to? Which one is most meaningful or most important? List as many communities as you can that you believe you belong to. Start with the community that you most identify with.
- As a group can we establish our own criteria for what makes something a community?
- How did we define community and what does INTELLECTUAL SAFETY have to do with our community?

## DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF INQUIRY

Perhaps most basic to successful P4C Inquiry is the clear and shared understanding that “we aren’t in a rush to get anywhere.”

(1) **Co-inquiry**: In Gently Socratic Inquiry, no one, especially not the teacher, knows either “the” answer to the question (if the inquiry begins with a question) or where the inquiry will lead. Any effort to guide an inquiry to a predetermined answer or outcome corrupts the process from the start. The dialogue develops its own integrity, its own movement, going where “it” wants or needs to go. At various points it may bog down and need an occasional nudge (“LMO”) but in the main, the inquiry emerges from the context. It frequently pushes what Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1986; Lipman, 1996) refers to as the “zone of proximal development” of all participants, including the teacher.

(2) **The source of the P4C Inquiry**: Whenever possible, the inquiry arises out of the questions and interests of the community, begins where the community is in its understanding, and moves in directions that the community indicates. There are a wide variety of possible triggers, occasions, and topics for inquiry. Plain Vanilla is one strategy or “how to” for finding a trigger and then giving shape to an inquiry.

### Plain Vanilla

**Step 1. Read** - A paragraph or two, an episode, a chapter, or a whole story. In the primary grades, the teacher may do the reading, or she may write the story on chart paper for everyone to read together. Alternatively, students could look at paintings, especially those by the students themselves; watch a video; read a poem; listen to a piece of music; or select a topic from a 'wonder box' into which children have placed things they wonder about.

**Step 2. Question** - Ask the students for questions or comments they have about the story. Write them down on chart paper with the child's name next to their comment. For older students, you may choose to use the **Problem of Praxis (POP) template**.

Step 3. Vote - As a class, the community votes for the question or comment they would like to inquire into first. Note this beside the question. Write NQP beside the question with the next highest number of votes.

Step 4. Dialogue/Inquiry - Inquire into the question selected, using WRAITEC (letters from the ToolKit) and magic words as appropriate. If the students lose energy for the question selected, the group can then vote to focus on the question marked NQP.

Step 5. Evaluate - Use the criteria suggested in this chapter, some subset thereof, or other criteria you select to reflect on the session.

(3) The self-corrective nature of P4C Inquiry: Matthew Lipman (1991), following in the pragmatist tradition of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, emphasizes the centrality of self-corrective inquiry. In classrooms where inquiry has become an essential and ongoing activity, community members will change and develop their thoughts about a particular topic. "Before I thought ..., but now I realize that . . . ." becomes an increasingly common comment in a maturing inquiry community in the course of a school year.

#### (4) INQUIRY TOOLS FOR SCRATCHING BENEATH THE SURFACE

Gently Socratic inquiry is more than a conversation or sharing of ideas within a group. These tools comprise the "Good Thinker's ToolKit." They are an important means for giving shape and direction to the notion that, although we aren't in a rush to get anywhere, we do have an expectation that we will get somewhere. One of the goals in developing inquiry skills is learning to "scratch beneath the surface" of any topic or question.

One form of progress occurs when an inquiry reveals how complicated the question or topic really is. Another form of progress is when connections begin to emerge among the various ideas that present themselves in the course of the inquiry. A third type of progress is when the shape of an answer begins to emerge. It is important to recognize that various participants in the same inquiry may individually experience different types of progress. For some, it may just be a muddle. For others, connections may begin to emerge, while still others may begin to have an answer in mind. Each form of progress has value and merit. A valuable exercise is to have students keep journals of inquiry sessions to promote an ongoing internal dialogue for each individual.

## THE GOOD THINKER'S TOOLKIT

Helping students and teachers internalize good thinkers' tools of inquiry equips them with the ability to think for themselves in a responsible way. With sustained experience in dialogue, students become more adept at giving and asking for reasons, detecting assumptions, anticipating consequences, reflecting on inferences they draw, asking for clarification and seeking evidence and examples as well as counterexamples. They also learn to seek out alternatives and to form criteria for the judgments they make. The letters W, R, A, I, T, E, and C represent the Good Thinker's Tools (Jackson, 1989):

*W = What do you/we mean by ... ?* [W] highlights the importance of being sensitive to possible multiplicity of meanings and ambiguity hence, a readiness to seek clarification when needed.

*R = Reasons.* [R] reflects that in inquiry one should expect that it is not enough to simply offer an opinion. Whenever possible, group members should support their opinions with reasons.

*A = Assumptions.* [A] represents the importance of making explicit, whenever appropriate, the assumptions that underlie the discussion during inquiry.

*I = Inferences; If . . . then...; Implications.* [I] highlights the central role of inferences we might make, of possible implications of what someone has said, and of hypothetical statements such as, "If what Jody said is true, then 'real' can't be just things we can see or touch."

*T = True?* [T] indicates that a major concern in our inquiry is the question of whether or not what someone has stated is in fact true, and how we might go about finding out.

*E = Examples; Evidence.* [E] points out the importance of giving examples to illustrate or clarify what someone is saying and of providing evidence to support a claim.

*C = Counterexample.* [C] represents an important check on assertions or claims that possibly cast too wide a net. For example, "always" or "never" frequently occur in conversations, such as "The boys always get to go first" or "We never get to stay up late." The search for counterexamples is a way of checking the truth of such a claim. For example, "You get to stay up late if it's a holiday" is a counterexample.

*Suggestion:* One suggested class activity is to make ToolKits together, so that each student has her own kit. Students design 3 x 5 cards, one for each letter, writing on the back of each card whatever clarifying notes will help them remember the significance of each letter. When desiring a reason from someone who is speaking, a student displays the [R] card. If an important assumption is going unnoticed, a student can show the [A] card, and so on. The class should also devote time, separate from the inquiry session, to becoming more familiar with each tool. In the course of an inquiry, anyone can place a card representing a given tool in the circle when they want to use that particular tool. This can facilitate the evaluation of the session at the end, as it makes apparent which tools made their appearance in the course of the day's inquiry.

### REFLECTING ON THE INQUIRY

Finally, it is important that the inquiry community reflect on how well it has done on any given day. The following criteria are suggested, which the teacher can present to the group prior to beginning the inquiry cycle and again at the end of each session. The criteria fall into two categories, those dealing with how we did as a community and those dealing with the inquiry itself.

#### How did we do as a community?

- Listening-Was I listening to others? Were others listening to me?
- Participation-Did most people participate rather than just a few who dominated?
- Safety-Was it a safe environment?

#### How was our inquiry?

- Focus-Did we maintain a focus?
- Depth-Did our discussions scratch beneath the surface, open up the topic, or otherwise make some progress?
- Understanding-Did I increase my understanding of the topic?
- Thinking-Did I challenge my own thinking or work hard at it?
- Interest-Was it interesting?

Points to Consider: At some point it is important for the group to discuss more fully what each criterion means. What, for example, counts as participation? Does one need to speak in order to participate? What does it mean to scratch beneath the surface? At an

appropriate time, the teacher can introduce the notion of three types of progress and the use of the various tools as indicators of scratching or its absence.

Large Group Community  
Discussion – Based Inquiry Evaluation  
(Developed by Dr. Amber Strong Makaiau)

For each of the criteria below you are to write down examples that you have observed during our class discussions. This is a formal discussion evaluation so you must write in complete sentences. We will be using your writing to critically evaluate how our class is functioning as a community and to assess the complexity of thinking that is occurring during our inquiries. When you are finished please star one positive thing that has been happening during our class discussions and underline one thing that you believe our classroom community needs to improve on.

1. Was I listening to others? Were others listening to me?

*EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR / COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTOR*

2. Was it a safe environment? (Remember how we defined intellectual safety when you complete your response).

*EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR / COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTOR*

3. Did most people participate? Did a few dominate? Did some not pay attention?



*COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTOR*

4. Did we maintain a focus? (Remember the question we voted on).

*COMPLEX THINKER IN INQUIRY*

5. Did our discussion “scratch beneath the surface, open up the topic,” or “make some progress?” (Look for examples of WRAITEC in use).

*COMPLEX THINKER IN INQUIRY*

6. Did I learn something new?

*SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER*

7. Did I challenge my own thinking or work hard at it?

<p>SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER</p>
<p>8. Was it interesting?</p>
<p>SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER</p>
<p>9. Was the quality of life improved in our community? Did we practice Ho’oponopono?</p>
<p>CITIZENSHIP / PARTICIPATION</p>

Plain Vanilla Philosophical Inquiry Rubric and Self-Assessment  
(Developed by Dr. Chad Miller)

	4 = Exceeds the Standard	3 = Meets the Standard	2 = Attempts to Meet the Standard	1 = Does Not Meet the Standard
Reading: Philosophical Annotations	My annotations make connections to my life, ask thoughtful and	Many of my annotations make connections to my life, ask meaningful	Some of my annotations make connections to my life, ask questions, and	Few of my annotations make connections to my life, ask questions, and

CCSS: Reading 1	meaningful questions, show I am thinking about my thinking, and seek perspectives that are different than my own in order to better understand the world and myself.	questions, show I am thinking about my thinking, and seek perspectives that are different from my own in order to better understand the world or myself.	seek different perspectives in order to better understand the world or myself.	seek different perspectives in order to better understand the world or myself.
Philosophical Question CCSS: Speaking & Listening 1c.	My posted question has all four components of a "good question for philosophy." <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Uses <i>The Good Thinker's Toolkit</i></li> <li>2. Moves beyond the "text" to question a larger issue.</li> <li>3. It makes you go "hmmmm..." &amp; produces more questions.</li> <li>4. Is something that you really want to think about; it's meaningful.</li> </ol>	My posted question has three of the four components of a "good question for philosophy."	My posted question has two of the four components of a "good question" for philosophy."	My posted question has one of the four components of a "good question for philosophy."
Democratic Voting	I <i>thoughtfully</i> voted on the question(s) I most wanted to inquire into with my peers.	I voted on the question(s) I most wanted to inquire into with my peers.	I voted on the question(s) to inquire into with my peers.	I thoughtlessly voted on question(s) to inquire into.
Written Response to Our Question Writing 1	My response clearly addresses our selected question and utilizes specific evidence (i.e. quotes or ideas from the texts, personal knowledge and experiences) to illuminate the depth of my response. It is clear, I	My response clearly addresses our selected question and utilizes evidence (i.e. quotes or ideas from the texts, personal knowledge and experiences to support my ideas).	My response addresses our selected question, but I did not use evidence to support my response.	My response does not address our selected question.

	am really "digging deep."			
<b>Participation in the Inquiry</b> CCSS: Speaking & Listening 1b/c	My active listening, questions, insights, examples push our community's thinking. My ideas are getting us to the "deep end" of the pool.	My listening, questions, insights, examples and evidence to <i>really</i> push our community's thinking. My ideas are trying to get us to the "deep end" of the pool.	My listening, questions, insights, examples and evidence somewhat or may push our community's thinking. My ideas get us to think deeper than where I can touch in the pool.	I have not really listened or offered any personal insights, response or evidence to assist our community's inquiries. Pool? I don't like getting wet,
<b>Reflection</b> CCSS: Writing 1 & 10 and/or Speaking & Listening 4	My reflection concerns what I learned to my life, identifies a new perspective and explains the significance of this realization and utilizes specific evidence from class (i.e. quotes or ideas from the texts, peers, or teacher) to illuminate the depth of my insights.	My reflection connects what I learned to my life, identifies and describes a new perspective, and utilizes evidence from class (i.e. quotes or ideas from the texts, peers, or teacher) to support my ideas.	My reflection attempts to connect what I learned to my life, identifies a new perspective, and utilizes evidence from class, but it is not entirely clear how it supports my ideas.	My reflection does not connect to my life, identify a new perspective, or use evidence to support my ideas.

### The Role of the Teacher

The teacher is absolutely pivotal to the success of Gently Socratic Inquiry. In the beginning it will be the teacher who introduces the ideas behind such inquiry. S/he will be responsible for establishing, monitoring, and maintaining the safety within the group. This will include monitoring the proper use of the community ball and calling on each other and seeing that members have ample opportunity to speak as well as permission to remain silent. The teacher is responsible for introducing the magic words and seeing to their proper use.

Most importantly, it is the teacher, especially in the beginning, who sets the time for the group. "Not being in a rush" depends on a teacher sufficiently comfortable with silence and "wait time" beyond what is typical in most classrooms. It requires a teacher whose own sense of wonder is still very much alive and who is keenly interested in what the authentic thoughts of the community are on a

given topic; one who is comfortable with uncertainty, not eager to push for closure, but willing to allow an inquiry to move where “it” and the community seem to want to take it. S/he must be willing to risk not knowing the answer; to indeed be a co-inquirer in the quest for an answer.

It is the teacher who brings a given session to a close and sees to it that the group conducts an evaluation. How long are inquiry sessions? With kindergarten children they last from 10 minutes to more than an hour. Sessions with older children tend to be more predictable in terms of length, but also more subject to the time demands of the school day and curriculum.

In this kind of inquiry, the teacher's role is to be pedagogically strong but philosophically self-effacing. The teacher should be firmly in control of the procedures but allow the content of the inquiry to unfold, as it needs to, rather than following the desires of the teacher. As the community grows and matures it will move from “beginning” to “emerging”, where the other members of the community internalize the protocols, call on each other, spontaneously begin to use the toolkit letters and so on. Finally, in a “mature” community, the teacher will be, in a sense, a co-equal participant.

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