

Philosophy in High Schools: Guest Editors' Introduction to a Special Issue of *Teaching Philosophy*

JANA MOHR LONE
University of Washington

MITCHELL GREEN
University of Connecticut

Over the past decade, philosophy has been a growing presence in high schools in the United States. History, English, math, art, social studies, and science teachers are weaving philosophical concepts into their curricula, developing units on philosophical topics, teaching stand-alone philosophy classes for a semester or an entire year, running Philosophy Clubs, and coaching High School Ethics Bowl teams. PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization), a national non-profit organization that supports and advocates the introduction of philosophy into K–12 classrooms, now sponsors a High School Essay Contest and administers awards for pre-college philosophy teachers. Professional philosophers, with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, have been offering summer institutes for high school teachers to enable them to return to their schools with the skills needed to incorporate philosophy into their curricula, and have run workshops around the country to support teachers' interest in introducing philosophy to their students. The High School Ethics Bowl has grown from the involvement of a few schools to more than 100 during 2012–2013, and the first National High School Ethics Bowl was held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in April 2013.

High school students gravitate to philosophy. In the teen years, the crucible of the formation of personality, students grapple with issues regarding time, death, personal identity, the nature of justice, the constituents of a good life, and the distinction between right and wrong, among many others. Often students are philosophizing without knowing it, and without realizing that their questions have been topics of intense inquiry for millennia. Thinking about these philosophical questions, in

structured ways with their peers and with proper guidance from teachers, enables students to evaluate claims based on reason and analysis rather than on entrenched beliefs and prejudice, setting the stage for students to become independent and capable thinkers in their own right.

Why is it important for high school students to have the opportunity to think about philosophical topics? We think there are three primary reasons.

First, schools often focus on answers rather than questions, and philosophy makes a space for students to gain experience questioning and examining their own experiences and ideas. Studying philosophy allows students to stop and think about foundational questions, and, especially in an environment in which testing and standardized assessments are paramount, young people are hungry for meaningful engagement. Nurturing curiosity and wonder can help young people to develop lives of greater depth and meaning, as well as a critical consciousness about the way things are. High school philosophy classes draw on topics that many students are examining on their own, connecting students' personal lives with topics explored in the classroom in a way that many students describe as transformative.

Second, nearly by definition, questions of philosophy do not have one settled answer. Philosophy teaches that any view must be taken seriously, no matter how outlandish it seems, so long as there are good reasons offered for it. Thus philosophy helps young people to appreciate and practice the virtue of tolerance. The experience of understanding that there is often more than one justifiable approach to a single problem, about which, therefore, reasonable people will disagree, is a powerful one.

Third, there is no better discipline for critical and creative thinking than philosophy. Studying philosophy trains you to think analytically at a very high level of abstraction, and the advanced reasoning and language skills that you use in the process are marvelous training for any career and simply for life. If you can think deeply about the intensely abstract questions of philosophy, you can think deeply about anything.

What follows are four essays by high school teachers at the forefront of a movement incorporating philosophy into the secondary curriculum. In the first contribution, "Socrates in Homeroom: A Case Study for Integrating Philosophy Across a High School Curriculum," James R. Davis advocates weaving philosophical instruction into existing curricula rather than adding designated philosophy electives on top of the courses already offered by high schools. On Davis's model, a biology teacher might incorporate into her lesson plans discussion of whether we can legitimately distinguish empirical knowledge from superstition, a history teacher could engage students in sustained discussion of whether citizens have any moral obligation to their government, a teacher of literature could help her students engage with ethics by discussing the choices made by

characters in novels her students are reading. Davis points out that this “integrationist” approach is likely to reach more students than the elective model. He offers sample lesson plans and closes with suggestions for how this approach may be implemented at a broad variety of schools.

By contrast, in “Building a High School Philosophy Program,” Sean Alan Riley explains how his school has developed three courses, “Critical Reading and Reasoning,” “History of Philosophy,” and “Ethics and Politics,” taken by a wide variety of students. The first of these three is taken by nearly all students at Riley’s school, resulting in such students having the basic principles of logic as a common ground. Riley describes these courses and what inspired their introduction, summarizes some student feedback, and offers suggestions for pitching similar courses to administrators as well as implementing them at a range of different schools.

The remaining two essays offer non-traditional and provocative proposals for incorporating philosophy into high schools. In the first, “What’s Wrong with This Picture? Teaching Ethics through Film to Wyoming High School Students,” Robert Colter and Joseph Ulatowski describe how they have used movies to help students engage with hard problems in ethics. They use the films *Unforgiven* and *Three Days of the Condor* as vivid thought experiments to challenge students’ ethical assumptions. (They also offer other examples of philosophically rich movies.) In the course of this, Colter and Ulatowski describe their technique of “scaffolding,” which requires students to make use of concepts they already grasp and offers assistance only on those that are new. They rightly see this as a special type of Socratic method and find inspiration for their approach in Plato’s *Meno*.

Finally, in “Teaching Philosophy through Lincoln-Douglas Debate,” Jacob Nebel, Ryan W. Davis, Peter van Elswyk, and Benjamin Holguin describe how in the context of the already-established system of Lincoln-Douglas debate—also known as “values debate”—they have enabled students to engage at a high level with issues such as capital punishment, justice in health care, and eminent domain in private enterprises. Nebel, Davis, van Elswyk, and Holguin aim to spur dialogue between debate instructors and philosophy teachers to enhance the Lincoln-Douglas debate program’s ability to promote philosophical inquiry at the secondary level. Advocating a move away from the competitive atmosphere that high school debate too often fosters, the authors include three recommendations for how Lincoln-Douglas debate can enhance philosophical engagement in high school.

Jana Mohr Lone is the director of the University of Washington Center for Philosophy for Children; mohrlone@uw.edu. Mitchell Green has just joined the philosophy faculty at the University of Connecticut, having previously taught at the University of Virginia; msg6m@virginia.edu.