

## **Is philosophy for children undialogical?**

A response to Nancy Vansieleghem, 'Listening to Dialogue', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (2006) pp. 175--190

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Philosophy for children (p4c) is sometimes criticised for being, in practice, not philosophical enough to justify the name, nor critical enough to challenge young people to reflect on their own opinions and values.

Nancy Vansieleghem criticises it from another perspective -- arguing that it is based, in theory, on a version of dialogue that is *too* dominated by argumentation and other forms of 'critical thinking'. According to Vansieleghem, when teachers encourage children to think critically, logically and questioningly, the true 'voice of the child' is lost. Dialogue becomes monologue – the monologue of abstract thinking and rationality which is the voice of the adult and perhaps also the dominant voice of western intellectual culture itself.

Vansieleghem is also critical of the notion of 'the community of inquiry' -- a central feature of p4c – because she claims it aims towards understanding and agreement. She uses some rather inflationary language to express her objections. For example, she tells us that 'the attempts to understand everything, is exactly what leads to totalitarianism and oppression,'<sup>1</sup> and that 'the need for agreement between the participants, neutralizes the difference. In this idea, the dialogue between the child and the adult does not extend any further than rewriting the message which was sent by the adult.'<sup>2</sup>

In her critique of the falsely-named dialogue she thinks is promoted by philosophy for children, Vansieleghem cites the Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language Michael Bakhtin as an ally, often quoting him in her article and prefacing her own opinions with phrases like 'With Bakhtin ...'

In this brief response Vansieleghem's article, I will argue that the sort of critical thinking encouraged by philosophy for children supports rather than destroys dialogue and that Bakhtin would have agreed with this view.

For Bakhtin, one defining characteristic of dialogue is a responsiveness that never ends. We respond to what others say to us in a particular moment, to what we read and to previous conversations we have had. We respond through thinking, speaking and writing. Books, for example are written in response to something and they assume a response from the reader. Response, and hence dialogue, is both internal (we talk and listen to ourselves) and external (we listen and respond to others). The point here is that the sort of dialogue undertaken in philosophy for children would be only one instance of dialogue in Bakhtin's universe of never-ending responsiveness, which we could describe as 'great dialogue'. If this is so, then philosophy for children which, let us remember, is done for at most several hours a week should be seen as an initiative that makes a valuable and distinctive contribution to 'great dialogue', not as something that seeks to reframe all dialogue in its own mould.

What, then, are the grounds for saying that philosophy for children makes a valuable and distinctive contribution to 'great dialogue', rather than an oppressive one? Simply that, through the community of inquiry, it promotes openness, responsiveness and meaningful dialogue about questions that matter to the children themselves. For dialogue to be meaningful, participants would need to question, recognise similarities and differences between contributions, sift and sort, and figure out for themselves what were the most

important elements in the conversation. If some people express opinions, then it does not seem monological for others to agree or disagree. Given agreement or disagreement, responsive dialogue seems to require an exploration of reasons. This is the kind of critical thinking that philosophy for children aims to develop: a responsiveness using a wide range of conceptual resources. It does not aim only for agreement as Vansieleghem claims. In a community of enquiry, disagreements and differences are accepted, valued and explored. Agreement is obviously one possible outcome of dialogue just as one useful strategy is to test which matters can be agreed and which can't. But then again, as Bakhtin points out, there are many varieties of agreement:

'One cannot ... understand dialogic relations simplistically and unilaterally, reducing them to contradiction, conflict, polemics, or disagreement. *Agreement* is very rich in varieties and shadings ... they are two utterances belonging to different voices linked by *dialogic relations of agreement*. This is a definite dialogic event in the interrelations of the two and not an echo. For after all, agreement could also be lacking.'<sup>3</sup>

The entanglements of disagreement and agreement, similarity and difference, of young people and their ideas, of concepts and experience are not denied by philosophy for children in favour of a simplistic dynamic pressing towards abstraction and agreement. Nevertheless P4C it does encourage children to think critically in order to search for meanings lodged in those entanglements.

There is nothing here that Bakhtin would disapprove of. One does not need to be too selective in reading him to find support for a view of dialogue that includes critical thinking. Here he is talking about the nature of dialogue:

'The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude towards it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution and so on ... any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker.'<sup>4</sup>

Nor would Bakhtin be too worried about the issue Vansieleghem raises of adults introducing concepts (ranging from 'fairness' to 'similar') into a dialogue. He would see it as a process of inevitable cultural assimilation rather than totalitarianism or oppression. Here is Bakhtin explaining how this inevitable process can be more or less creative:

'This is why the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances. This experience can be characterised to some degree as the process of *assimilation* — more or less creative -- of others' words (and not the words of a language). Our speech, that is all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words varying degrees of otherness and varying degrees of "our-own-ness" varying degrees of awareness and attachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural assimilation would only be uncreative and oppressive if responsiveness was curtailed or discouraged, or perhaps if participants refused to listen to each other, as real people, and were *only* concerned with fitting another's utterances into preconceived dogmatic schema, whatever the sources of those schemas were.

Yet the community of inquiry conceived as a group of people meeting regularly to respond to each others ideas about questions that matter is a forum that deliberately keeps responsiveness alive and so is dialogical in Bakhtin's terms. And if teachers introduce, into a dialogue, concepts to be used and analysed, it is in order that they provide participants with resources for further dialogue rather to settle any question for good.

Further dialogue of many varieties can happen elsewhere in the school curriculum. Philosophy for children is not the last word in dialogue nor does it aim to be. There could be opportunities for Vansieleghem's preferred approach to dialogue to be undertaken alongside philosophy for children, with both contributing to the continuous cycle of response and counter response that is 'great dialogue'.

I must admit, though, that I have some difficulty understanding Vansieleghem's dialogic alternative. She argues, for example that: 'The meaning is embodied in the resonance of the sound, in the experience of the vibration itself. Listening to the meaning of the dialogue does not imply understanding but experiencing the other in me. It refers to the moment of being touched.'<sup>6</sup> She also writes: 'To be clear, the dialogue fulfils nothing: it cuts, it breaks, and it exposes. But while it exposes it selves (sic), it presents its unfulfillment. This moment of presentation is the moment of "thinking for oneself with others". This moment happens and happens endlessly in the withdrawal of its own presentation, it touches as it traverses.'<sup>7</sup>

Now I must admit that I don't understand what Vansieleghem is proposing here. I would like to understand it but the only way for me to do that would be to respond, to question, to ask if what she means is this or that, to agree and disagree with parts and to await a response. These are the sorts of things I understand as critical thinking but they are the sorts of things Vansieleghem categorises as non-dialogical. But if the core of dialogue is response, how can I respond to something I find meaningless? Vansieleghem offers little help to me or to other enthusiasts for philosophy for children who, *with Bakhtin*, see dialogue as active, responsive and evaluative. Vansieleghem on the other hand offers this advice: 'Philosophy for Children should, instead of creating a space of being active, identify a "space between". A space to exhort children to stop and think by themselves, withdraw from the world.'<sup>8</sup> This would not be a space for dialogue as I understand it.

ENDNOTES

1. Nancy Vansieleghem, Listening to Dialogue, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (2006) p. 180
2. *Ibid*, p.182
3. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Translated by Vern, W. McGee, (1987), p. 125
4. *Ibid*, p. 68.
5. *Ibid*, p. 89.
6. Vansieleghem, *Ibid*, p.188
- 7 Vansieleghem, *Ibid*, p.187
8. Vansieleghem, *Ibid*, p.188--189