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Cultural DeCoding: A humanities program for gifted and talented high school students seeking university entrance

Laura D'Olimpio
University of Notre Dame Australia, laura.dolimpio@nd.edu.au

Angela McCarthy
University of Notre Dame Australia, angela.mccarthy@nd.edu.au

Annette Pedersen
The University of Western Australia

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AUSTRALIA

Cultural DeCoding: A humanities program for gifted and talented high school students seeking university entrance

Dr Laura D'Olimpio

The University of Notre Dame Australia

laura.dolimpio@nd.edu.au

Dr Angela McCarthy

The University of Notre Dame Australia

angela.mccarthy@nd.edu.au

Dr Annette Pedersen

The University of Western Australia and John XXIII College

pedersen.annette@johnxxiii.edu.au

You want to prepare your child to think as he gets older. You want him to be critical in his judgments. Teaching a child, by your example, that there's never any room for negotiating or making choices in life may suggest that you expect blind obedience-but it won't help him in the long run to be discriminating in choices and thinking.

Lawrence Balter, Psychologist

Dr Balter's child sense, 1985

Abstract

This article details *Cultural DeCoding*, a humanities based high school extension program for gifted and talented Year 11 and 12 students in Western Australia. The brainchild of Dr Annette Pedersen (UWA & John XXIII College) and Dr Angela McCarthy (UNDA), the program runs for four days across the summer holidays before the start of the school term. The program fills a gap that exists in the education of gifted and talented secondary students who are interested in the humanities. It is comprised of sessions run by academics who facilitate discussion and activities based on their area of research and teaching expertise. The group is deliberately kept small in order to give students a chance to engage deeply and respectfully with like-minded others. The intention is to give these students an

experience of what university will be like, and to have a chance to think philosophically; namely, critically, creatively and morally, in collaboration with others.

Keywords

art, education, gifted and talented, humanities, philosophy, theology

Introduction

The current approach to education consists of outcomes-based education alongside values-based education. Sometimes the two may seem at odds. If we are training students to meet outcomes and be good at scoring high test results, we may wonder if this is the same as encouraging them to be good citizens who are able to think for themselves within a context of the community in which they live. Advocates of Philosophy for Children (P4C) take these questions as central to their enterprise and they apply the Community of Inquiry (CoI) pedagogy to teaching in all subject areas, not solely philosophy. In this manner, the approach outlined by practitioners of P4C may apply more widely to other humanities subject areas, and to dialogue in general. The aim of philosophy is that a conversation becomes a dialogue, and that participants are able to engage critically with ideas presented. Supporters of P4C wish to add that creative and caring thinking skills are also valuable in an effort to encourage students to become democratic and moral citizens. The current high expectations of schooling and the role teachers play in shaping good citizens is paralleled by the desire to see students achieve good academic results. We claim that the two are compatible and supported by a flexible, creative approach to teaching and learning, particularly through the study of subjects in the humanities.

In this paper we detail one practical example whereby the liberal arts tradition may provide opportunities for students to practice critical thinking and social skills; striving to improve both academic and moral achievement. While not as quantifiable as some science subjects, the study of the humanities enhances critical thinking, social skills and an ethical understanding of the socially situated individual. For these reasons and more, we established a humanities-based extension program for gifted and talented Year 11 and 12 students for high schools in Western Australia, in order to give students a chance to experience what university will be like, and to have a chance to think creatively, morally and expansively in collaboration with others. The brainchild of Dr Annette Pedersen (UWA & John XXIII College), who

had taught in both tertiary and secondary (high school) educational institutions, the *Cultural DeCoding* program was designed to fill an epistemological gap in many students who lacked an understanding of some of the key philosophical and/or religious ideas that underpin Western culture. It was also intended to provide such students with a safe place in which to explore some of the profound ideas raised by considering philosophy, theology, art or other humanities disciplines in relation to our secular Western society.

The common praxis across these various humanities subject areas is the philosophical thinking as applied in the pragmatic and holistic manner described by John Dewey (1934; 2008) which sees such thinking as an embodied experience; an activity, rather than simply a rational exercise in pure logic. We will describe the program and make links to the pedagogical advantages of teaching in a holistic and pragmatic manner that allows for critical thinkers to be creatively engaged, and we offer this example to point to the value of the humanities (particularly philosophy, theology and aesthetics) within an educative environment.

Designing the program

The idea for Cultural DeCoding was conceived by Dr Annette Pedersen (UWA & John XXIII College) who, in conjunction with Dr Angela McCarthy (UNDA), started planning for the first holiday program in 2011. Joined by a core group of academics and support staff, the details were established and the program was held for the first time in January 2012. The name Cultural DeCoding was proposed by the project's support librarian, who was inspired by the notion of decoding historical systems of thinking that can lead to new discoveries about our present and possibilities for our future. As Year 11 and 12 can be quite focused on outcomes such as test results, Cultural DeCoding offers a different way of thinking about study and research. Students are encouraged to value the exploration of ideas for their own sake, as opposed to seeking and retaining information in order to pass a test. In this way, the program opens the minds of the students to the more expansive university environment that awaits them once they have concluded their schooling. The program runs for four days across the summer holidays before the start of the school term and is intended for gifted and talented students who are seeking an extension in the study of humanities subjects. The program is pitched at an undergraduate university level, therefore it was thought that gifted students would be best suited academically to participate. It was also thought that the program could offer gifted

students from various schools the opportunity to meet and talk with like-minded peers who are interested in the humanities subject areas.

The program is comprised of sessions run by academics who usually lecture in disciplines such as English Literature, Communications and Media, History, Politics, Archaeology, Theatre Studies, Philosophy, Theology, and Law. There is also a session on new and old library technology. The academics facilitate discussion and activities based on their areas of research and teaching expertise. It is up to the academic presenting the session to devise their own lesson plan. Discussion is held between the academics and the organisers of the program who have experience teaching secondary students and gifted students, but freedom is given to the academics to align their chosen subject area and topic with the theme of decoding a historical idea or concept and relating that knowledge to lived experience. Enrolment numbers are deliberately limited to fewer than 40 students, in order to give participants the opportunity to engage deeply and respectfully with like-minded others. The intention is to give these students an experience of studying at university with lecturers who are passionate about their own fields of research.

Given that the subject areas focused on are in the humanities, the liberal arts tradition is central to the program. Concepts that are shared throughout the different subject areas include ideas of truth, beauty and value. The activities are facilitated in such a way as to be student-focused and thus the students take responsibility for the meaning-making done in each session. In order to make the idea of 'knowledge for its own sake' attractive, the aesthetic component of the day is important. This aesthetic component is made manifest by the design team at the University who use a consistent theme across the suite that commences with the invitations and information brochures sent out to schools, and then continues with the signage, maps and packs given to the students on the first day and concludes with certificates of participation handed out on the final day.

The design style is in keeping with the theme of decoding historical systems of thinking and provides a visible and tangible link between the various subject areas. For example, the program timetable and campus map issued to students incorporate the theme of symbols on parchment (Figure 1). The brochures, certificates of completion, signage for directions, name tags and all other materials use the same parchment theme and are given to the students on the first day in a calico, screen printed bag. Students are also provided with wooden clipboards and an old style clip to give a tangible sense of something old, rather than of the new and shiny. This combination of symbolic language and aesthetic value lead to the investigation of

thinking and systems of communication present in library cataloguing, philosophy, theology, history, architecture, English and theatre and film studies, as well as the visual arts. Each of the areas have a symbol related to the ideas they encompass so discovery begins with the timetable itself.
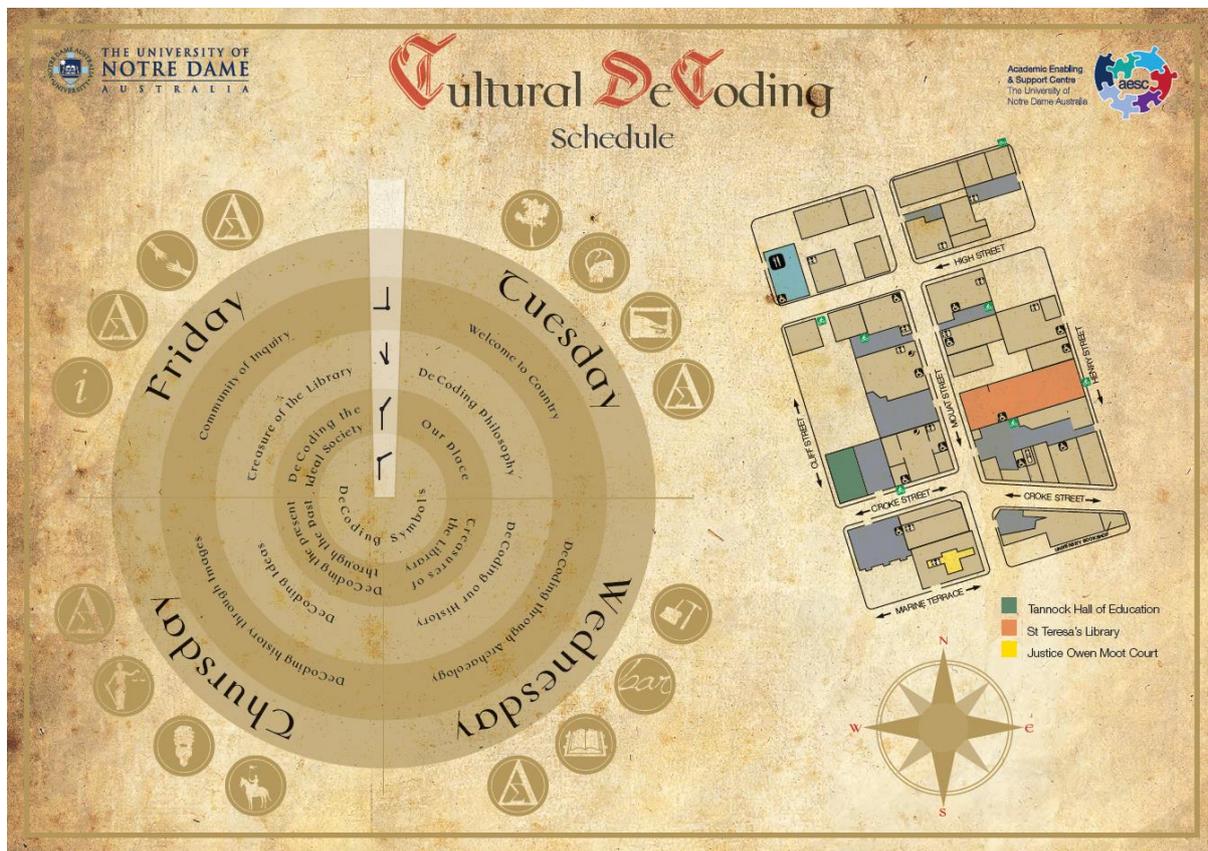

Figure 1: Timetable and campus map. Design by Nicholas Carson

Highlights of the program

The program has changed slightly each year Cultural DeCoding has been offered, in most part due to the academics available to offer sessions each summer. However, consistently there have been 60- or 90-minute sessions in Philosophy, Theology, Law, English Literature, Communications and Media, History, Politics, Archaeology, Theatre Studies, and the Library Information session that was linked to an app the students could download to their mobile phones and use in the library. The last session of each day has been a reflective, quiet session aimed at aesthetic appreciation and allowing for inward contemplation after a busy day of interaction and activity. The final day has always offered two panels: one on religion and one on

philosophy that creates space for students' questions and engagement with a panel of experts.

The focus for the program is not on outcomes achieved but on expansive thinking, brain storming, creative and intellectual play, reflection and self-discovery. The program includes group activities along with mini-lectures, and the chance to explore the local community of Fremantle. This was evidenced by the inclusion of a historical walk conducted around Fremantle by our resident historian and archeologist who narrated a sense of place through time and encouraged the students to make links to historical events as they walked down the street. In this way, the students who were engaged in the program were encouraged to be socially situated, observant and critically engaged members of a community of inquirers.

Two 90-minute philosophy sessions on two of the days deliberately incorporated the community of inquiry (CoI) pedagogy as practiced by P4C practitioners. The CoI sees participants seated in an inward-facing circle with the teacher or philosopher acting as facilitator of the dialogue. One session on Rawl's notion of the veil of ignorance saw students in small groups exploring what an 'ideal society' would look like. The students were told to dream up the perfect society given that you would not know who you would be (male, female, intelligent or physically abled or not, which class or race or age) in such a community. After mapping this out using large, A3 sheets of blank paper, all students then participated in a CoI, further exploring their ideas and questions that had arisen during the brain storming process.

The second philosophy session explored the idea of the virtues. After a short, interactive lecture on Aristotle and the notions of virtue (*aareté*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and flourishing (*eudaimonia*), students were again divided into small groups and given a long list of character traits or behaviours/habits (i.e. lying, smoking, telling a white lie, overindulging in chocolate cake, bravery, honesty, shyness, tolerance, etc.). Students were to discuss which they thought were virtues, vices or neither and they could map these out on a sliding scale using large, blank sheets of paper (i.e. A3 size). The students then regrouped, forming a whole class CoI to discuss the idea of virtues as habits that lead to a good life. In the CoI students also critiqued the idea that virtues can be defined or individual habits categorised in such a way that is said to causally lead to individual and/or societal flourishing. In each of these sessions, the philosopher facilitating the activity provided the students with historical information about the theorists and concepts they were exploring, allowing students to see how these classical ideas have held prominence over time.

Some of the student feedback in the anonymous survey completed on the final day indicated that the philosophy sessions were gauged positively. The use of the CoI in the philosophy sessions achieved the intended aim of making philosophical dialogue academically interesting, engaging, as well as fun. This is demonstrated by the following comments from students who were asked what their favourite aspect of Cultural DeCoding was:

> *the Critical Thinking was highly engaging and fun in subjects such as philosophy*

> *the philosophy session was a useful way to be able to think abstractly and share ideas and values with the fellow students in the course*

> *the philosophy sessions were very interesting as they allowed me to discover and apply many new ideas. The community of inquiry and decoding the ideal society were particularly fascinating*

> *Philosophy because it is applicable to alot* [sic] *of topics that help us understand our society. It gives us an idea on life, showed us the pros and cons of the way we live*

> *PHILOSOPHY! The conceptual and real understanding of cultural values and practices have helped me to further comprehend the world. Which is extremely important as this is what a teenager aims to do!*

Learners as situated and creative

The pragmatism of American philosopher John Dewey subscribes to the notion that education is a holistic approach aimed at shaping a person to become a good citizen. In keeping with this concept, teachers are guides who assist students to engage with ideas and make meaning, which is an active process as opposed to a passive experience. The student is recognised as an embodied self with their own thoughts, feelings and experiences upon which to draw. They are given the opportunity to think and reflect – upon their own assumptions and ideas as well as those of others. For Dewey, truth is pluralistic and democratic precisely because the student is not an isolated mind but, rather, a member of a group of learners who are capable of thinking and feeling; human beings are critical and creative, caring and collaborative.

Dewey's lecture series on aesthetics, *Art as experience* (1934), is imbued with the pragmatism of William James, exploring how art develops out of everyday experience and seeking to widen the discourse of aesthetics so as to recognise that

our creation, experience and appreciation of the aesthetic is linked intrinsically to being human. Dewey states,

> The existence of art is concrete proof … that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and that he does so in accord with the structure of his organism—brain, sense-organs, and muscular system. Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse, and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and redisposition. Thus it varies the arts in ways without end. But its intervention also leads in time to the *idea* of art as a conscious idea—the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity. (1934, p. 26)

We may certainly consider aesthetic concepts when engaging with texts or artworks, yet here we are presented with the idea of the aesthetic imbued in our everyday life. All of our experiences have a wide sense of the artistic about them simply because we are embodied creatures who use all of our senses to understand and make sense of the world. As the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty stated, 'It is through my body that I understand other people; just as it is through my body that I perceive "things"' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 186). The idea that the aesthetics of experience are, in some sense, ordinary, goes hand in hand with the notion that we are creative beings as well as rational. As we see here, Dewey thought of the experience of Art in a wide sense, and tied the idea of human creativity to concepts of both work and play. Dewey saw no need to distinguish the realms of 'work and play' in either education or in life. At the end of his *Democracy and education* (1916/2008), Dewey concludes with a broad understanding of the aesthetic when he states, 'Work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art—in quality if not in conventional designation'.

Yet while Dewey runs together concepts like work and play, art and practiced activity, he doesn't explicitly refer to students being taught aesthetics. Ronald Moore does not find this surprising, given the infused manner in which Dewey envisioned education taking place. Moore (1994) notes,

> It is hardly surprising that in all of Dewey's voluminous writings, there is no explicit discussion of the prospect of introducing aesthetics as a subject in (precollege) schools. As Dewey saw it, aesthetics was already there; it had to be. Children on a playground, in coming to appreciate the special joys of baseball and its many subtly interwoven elements, become as directly aware of an

aesthetic dimension of life as children drilled in the "masters" of artistic tradition. (p. 9)

On this perspective, the Arts subjects, traditionally referred to as the Humanities, can work together to encourage a whole-child approach to education. This is what the Cultural DeCoding program relies on when it combines the various subjects in a four day program, bringing critical, creative and collaborative thinking skills into each subject area, without there being any jarring or tension between the disciplines. The tension is dissipated as students are able to critique the information they are receiving and take from each teacher or discussion or activity what suits them. While this sounds quite subjective, the overarching values shared across each subject area is the idea that Dewey promotes: truth is shared and democratic and the student is making meaning from these traditions that have a long history.

Setting aside the practical skills that would be subject specific, Moore claims that, 'aesthetics asserts its worth not by competing with the other art disciplines, but by exploring the meaning and value of their ingredients and interrelations' (1994, p. 11) and, furthermore, 'The argument for the indispensability of aesthetics in an integrated arts curriculum turns on the simple fact that many of the most important issues posed by the other disciplines are themselves philosophical' (1994, p. 11). We can therefore see the diverse arts disciplines as distinct, yet compatible as they tie to the central concern of humans as we try to understand lived experience. While Moore is specifically advocating the incorporation of philosophy and philosophical aesthetics in to the art classroom in order to develop aesthetic adults, his point here is that questions about value and beauty and intention automatically link to life as well as to art. Dewey would surely agree that these important questions permeate aesthetics as well as critical thinking more generally. Moore concludes that, 'In general, philosophy of art doesn't have to be imported; it can hardly be kept out. The questions young people are likely to ask about art provoke the very questions aesthetic theory is designed to answer' (1994, p. 12).

In the Cultural DeCoding program a central component of each day was the final art session that played with and meditated upon the use of icons. Such powerful symbols are tied socially and historically to places, cultures and religions. Even if individual students do not recognise or resonate with these images, there is a powerful transformation that can occur in the moments of silence offered during which students have the chance to work silently in an individual manner at the end of the day. In this way the program recognised that while we are social creatures, we

must also make space for the individual thoughts and reflections to develop and be recognised.

Iconography

In 2012 and 2013, the final silent sessions were based on iconography and completed in silence. The term iconography refers to the study of the language and history of symbols that are present in religious art. 'The iconography of Christian art is concerned with … individual pictorial themes. It investigates their origin, traces the changes they undergo as they develop' (Schiller 1969, p. 1). In this way, iconography is connected to many diverse religious doctrines and theologies. Iconography can also refer to the actual 'writing' of an icon; theology written down in images, for example, 'of a saint … who provides a focus for the veneration and reverence of personalities who offered models for the best Christian life' (Cormack 2007, pp. 7-8). The manner in which icons are written is tied to the symbols used that give an understanding of the theology, and the matter that is used is primarily wood and paint applied in a distinctive way. The exercise for Cultural DeCoding introduced the students to the manner and matter as explained above, and then gave them the opportunity to use paint to fill in a black outline of a religious image with their own choice of colours. This artistic activity was contemplative and resonated with the students' own understanding of the symbolic language.

To do this activity in silence was quite difficult for many students but their responses in the evaluation indicated that even if they found it challenging, it was a worthwhile exercise as it gave them time to think and process the material received through the day. Some of the student feedback included:

> *I found the iconography (decoding symbols) the least useful as it was extremely hard to sit in silence for such a long period of time*

> *Possibly not spend so much time painting. I understand it is a time of reflection and relaxation, but limiting time spent on it would enhance the meaning rather [than] drawing it out, resulting in the loss of the message of the activity.*

The iconography sessions were designed to allow for some time to be focused more internally rather than externally, given the energetic level of engagement most of the sessions required. The intention behind this period of silence and reflection was also to contrast to the busyness of the contemporary world. By using an artistic medium, this provided students with one way in which contemplation can be achieved using art.

In 2016 colouring in books are at the top of Australia's adult bestseller list. This is an interesting phenomenon that centres on the idea that twenty-first century anxiety-prone and stressful lives can be eased by a simple action such as colouring in. Therefore, instead of using icons, in 2016 the students engaged in colouring in an intricate line drawing by a local Fremantle artist, Linda Fardoe. Linda presented the drawing initially to the 2016 cohort and spoke about the meditative process she enters into in order to create such intricate works. Arguments abound as to whether or not colouring in is actual therapy or is it simply a fad that has helped reduce stress for busy people. Stephanie Holm claims in *Wildscapes: an Australian art therapy colouring book* (2015, preface) that her book 'represents a chance to explore your creativity—and to de-stress and soothe the mind and spirit in the process'. Dr Stan Rodski, a neuropsychologist and neuroscientist, claims that colouring is 'a process that takes us to a time that is stress free'(Carter 2015). He describes how brainwaves and heart rhythms can be measured so that the impact of particular activities can be related to brain reactions. Doing an activity such as colouring in can be empirically shown to be a relief for the brain. Therefore, the final session of the day for Cultural DeCoding participants gives them an opportunity to reduce their activity levels to absorb the multitude of ideas and activities in which they have engaged.

In 2016, given that most students were familiar with the adult colouring in craze that had only recently gained momentum, they were much more comfortable with the silent session offered at the end of each day. As such, their feedback on this session included

> *I loved the colouring de-stress activity at the end of the day. I felt very relaxed and calm afterwards and in a positive mindset*

> *I found colouring the least useful compared to the other workshops, although it was a new experience and a nice way to finish the day*

> *the colouring was an interesting addition to the course*

It is unsurprising that students found sitting quietly to complete an artistic activity so difficult. Our contemporary society is technologically charged with access to more information from multiple sources than ever previously. The sessions on Iconography and colouring in were deliberately included to offer a space for students to unplug from a frenetic, almost distracted state of learning, and instead be still and look inward.

The Christian tradition has long engaged in meditative processes and the neurological results are now being studied. There is an emerging field of

neurotheology and spiritual neuroscience that are examining 'the plasticity and malleability of the human brain to make a case for greater use of contemplative and mindfulness meditation practices in pastoral care and counseling' (Bingaman 2013, p. 549). The research has demonstrated that in religious communities contemplative practices have been able to 'balance the brain's well documented negativity bias, thus generating less fearful and anxious perspectives on life and human relationships' (Bingaman 2013, p. 550). The colouring in sessions for the 2016 program replaced the drawing of icons as the final session for each day, yet both sessions were conducted in silence in order to make room for students to reach a place of balance after the impact of strong interaction with new ideas, new people and a new environment.

In making space for the students' own voices to be heard, we are acknowledging the wisdom of every person and creating room for the students themselves to realise they have wisdom unique to their own life experience. If Karen Murris (2013) is correct, then we need to listen carefully for children's wisdom and not mistakenly attribute a lack of knowledge and wisdom to them. Epistemic injustice occurs when we make implicit as well as explicit assumptions and prejudices about child and childhood, including stereotypes that children are typically immature and ill-informed. Rather, Murris cites the need for epistemic trust, modesty and equality when she writes,

> When thinking *alongside* children, *everyone* needs to 'give' their mind to what there is to think about, which is only possible when adults are also 'open-minded', have epistemic modesty and epistemic trust. If what children say is not heard (but laughed at)—epistemic equality is absent. (2013, p. 334)

Murris admits that stereotypes of children as immature and ill-informed may be difficult to shake, but that children do have the ability to engage philosophically with concepts and allow new ideas to emerge through dialogue or hermeneutic practice. With the student-centred approach of the Cultural DeCoding program, teachers create room for themselves as well as the participants to be surprised by creative approaches to learning. Listening to diverse voices and reflecting upon one's own ideas was central to the program, as evidenced in the two panels hosted on the final day which invited religious leaders and philosophers to share multiple perspectives with the students who formulated their own questions to explore in these sessions.

The Religion and Philosophy panels

The last day of the program includes a theology panel and a philosophy panel. Each panel was preceded by a session in which the students were able to think about and prepare questions for the panel that was to follow. This preparatory session was facilitated by a theologian and a philosopher respectively. The time taken to consider what questions the students had and what they would like to ask religious leaders in their community as well as philosophers demonstrated to the students that their ideas and queries were valued. This encouraged the students to commence and engage in conversations about religious and philosophical ideas. The sessions supported the students to act as autonomous thinkers, investigating topics they were interested in and this gave students' self-confidence. This confidence came from knowing that they had a voice and were encouraged to query respected members of their community and join in on existing debates that occur within these communities as well as the academy.

The religion panel incorporated representatives of Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. In 2014 a representative of the Baha'i community was added, and in 2016 a Hindu leader was included. Women and men in diverse roles comprise the panels and have consisted of an Imam, a Buddhist monk, a Rabbi and a Catholic Christian. The representatives were from the local communities and offered the students a glimpse into the diversity present in their own country and which they may not always witness. The ideal of religious inclusion and tolerance was visible as members of diverse religious denominations were able to converse civilly, even when disagreeing with some ideas presented by other panelists. The panelists agreed upon fundamental human values and spoke of the role of religion in society.

The panel answered questions for an hour and a half and it was a generous donation of their time and expertise. The panelists expressed that they were pleased to be a part of an ecumenical discussion with gifted and talented students. For 2016 the time was extended to two hours to allow one hour for the students to approach each panelist in a small group situation and then an additional hour of open forum questioning and answers. In the anonymous student feedback forms that were completed on the last day, the comments demonstrated that the students were deeply impressed with the experience of the religious panel because it gave them a safe venue to explore the various world religions from experts who were accessible in their manner and attitude. Student feedback included:

> *I found that talking to people in the different religions was quite useful because we got to see how people in different religions live.*

> *The religion panel was incredibly useful for understanding different faiths and hearing how they all overlap but also greatly contrast.*

> *I found the religion panel very useful in dismissing many of the myths and stereotypes about religion. I also found having experts in their field very engaging as it was clear they were passionate about their area of expertise.*

The religion panel took place in the morning. In the afternoon the students had a session with a philosopher to prepare questions for the philosophy panel. The philosophy panel was another session in which there was evidence of deep thinking and good questioning by the students. The questions ranged from, 'Is there a God or life after death?' to 'what makes us really us: how can we identify ourselves?' and 'is there ever a time when it is morally acceptable to kill someone?' to 'what is the good life?'. Classical philosophical themes were touched upon in the areas of metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, epistemology ('how do we know what we think we know to be true?'; 'what is truth?') and political philosophy ('is capitalism the best system we have?'). The philosophers on the panel offered various theories that have been given to answer these questions and considered some of the strengths and weaknesses of those answers. There was acknowledgement that the questions themselves are worth asking and trying to answer, even if perfect, absolute, infallible responses can never be reached as the dialogue brings us closer, collectively to the truth.

The panels encouraged the students to practice critical, creative and empathetic thinking. The questions and the multiple answers given to these questions allowed the students to hear a diversity of opinions; but this diversity or multiculturalism did not collapse into complete subjectivity. The students were encouraged to adopt perspectives different to their own assumed point of view, and challenge as well as critique the ideas presented along with their own assumptions. The intention behind the panels was not to change the mind or opinion of anyone participating but, rather, to recognise that there are core values and ideas that all humans share. An example of this is the idea of the 'good life'; that people generally wish to live in harmony in communities in which we can cooperate and flourish. One student's feedback reflected this understanding when they wrote:

> *The discussion of Religion was really insightful and allowed me to understand how they are all essentially similar in striving for happiness and eradication of suffering and evil.*

The value of critical thinking is that it allows people to be thoughtful, to consider the ideas presented to them, to challenge and reflect upon notions that are held dear to others, and to work out if these ideas are also what the thinker themselves values

and agrees with. In this way the panels encouraged dialogue and the consideration of perspectives other than one's own. In our global world this is a necessary skill.

There are certainly academic benefits to teaching children general thinking skills and critical thinking skills in particular. Critical thinking skills will help students with their essay writing and exam answers, but there is more to it than this alone. While doing well on tests and getting into a good university and landing a good job is important, the study of philosophy and critical thinking skills also helps you to be a good person. The benefits and outcomes of such thinking skills are not purely academic; they are also social and personal. Critical thinkers continue conversations that seek to dispel ignorance. Instead of simply accepting what one is told, critical thinkers consider if the information is true, supported, valuable, and worth believing and acting upon. It is these thinking skills that a holistic approach to education seeks to encourage.

Outcomes and values in education

The Western Australian Government's Curriculum Council identifies Critical Reflection as an individual value. Critical reflection is defined in the WA School Curriculum as the ability to 'reflect critically on both the cultural heritage and the attitudes and values underlying current social trends and institutions' (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, Government of Western Australia 2013). This value is compatible with the nine values listed for schools nationally which include: Care and Compassion; Integrity; Doing Your Best; Respect; Fair Go; Responsibility; Freedom; Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion; Honesty and Trustworthiness (DEEWR 2011). It would seem that in order to be respectful, give people a 'fair go', and maintain integrity, one would need to have certain critical thinking skills.

Willis and Kissane, reviewing the literature about outcomes-based education, highlight the issues surrounding the shift in the education system to focus on 'what the students have learned rather than on what systems and schools have provided and teachers have taught' (Willis & Kissane 1995, p. 2). Quoting Brandt, they state, 'Educators and the public need to understand why society will be better served if schools clarify their purposes, reorganize as necessary to achieve these purposes, and expect students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed for success in life' (Willis & Kissane 1995, p. 1). An underpinning rationale for outcomes-based education is 'better accountability'. Couple this with a requirement that schools be more efficient in cost-benefit terms (not necessarily bad in itself but suspect when total costs including salaries are fixed in block grants), and principles of line

management similar in character to business corporations, it is possible to question the rhetoric surrounding curriculum. Instead of teachers simply being required to further the utilitarian function of school by contributing to the direct productivity of labour, we seek to inspire students based on the teachers' area of expertise. In this way the teachers become role models of learned people to which students may aspire, promoting knowledge for knowledge's sake as opposed to being limited by the sieve of economic rationalism. Cultural DeCoding models this approach by offering students a glimpse into the world of each participating academic's own research. This means that students are sharing knowledge with academics who are passionate about their own area of enquiry and this passion is communicated to the students.

A fascinating aspect of this contemporary approach to education known as outcomes-based education is that content, or what the student should be taught, is replaced by principles which ostensibly should, to quote; 'guide learning, teaching and assessment; [together with] the five core shared values which underpin the achievement of overarching and learning area outcomes' (Barry & King 2000, p. 13). The 'core values' are particularly important for an education system within a multicultural society, for they, together with the overarching principles of the curriculum, provide the underpinning for a pedagogic practice that produces a more efficient workforce. The aim is to ensure that the workforce is civic-minded and socially cohesive irrespective of the subject's cultural origin. The 'core values' thus remind us that education is a vital part of the state apparatus. The 'core values' are the key means of ensuring that some vestiges of civil society remain intact.

The notion of 'the civil' has a long history in Western culture; it comes to us from Ancient Greece and in contemporary society it relates to the organisational structure of government and, more importantly, to the acceptance by ordinary citizens of certain social obligations. This latter aspect requires of the individual in their daily lives, observation of basic standards of personal restraint, respect for the integrity, dignity and rights of others regardless of personal ties, and a commitment to the resolution of conflicts by peaceful and lawful means. Implicit is some element of civility (manners, courtesy, etc.) that has, in contemporary society, achieved a somewhat old-fashioned flavour. But how can we expect to sustain a civil society when the moral code underpinning it is no longer understood, let alone accepted by the majority? As we lose history and culture from our curriculum, so we lose sight of the 'civil'. We may well ask, 'what are we educating children for?' We live in a world of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy), where

NAPLAN's national minimum standards describe some of students' skills and understandings in relation to literacy and numeracy. The standards are intended to be a snapshot of typical achievement and do not describe the full range of what students are taught or what they may achieve. The national minimum standards at Years 3 (8 years old), 5 (10 years old), 7 (12 years old) and 9 (14 years old) represent increasingly challenging skills and understandings as students move through the years of schooling. In contrast to concerns about literacy and numeracy, and also, sadly, anxiety about where particular schools might rank on the league tables, where is the focus on depth and moral discernment, on what it is to be human, on how to realise the full potential of our students?

With the realisation of the Cultural DeCoding program, we have evidence of the optimism we hold as teachers that education is a tool to enable students to develop into functioning, reflective, ethical, just and moral citizens in a civil state. Curriculum should support these intentions and reflect a desire for students 'to be' in a broader and deeper sense than can be described by a future career. The intention behind the Cultural DeCoding program was to develop a course designed to make students connect ideas of Western culture across disciplines. This collaborative and creative project is designed to allow spaces for students to be enlightened through dialectic (as per the sense used in Adorno & Horkheimer 1986). In bringing final years secondary students from diverse backgrounds together to explore some of the foundational ideas of the modern world, we create a powerful site for praxis.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the traditional approach to education has widened. These days educational approaches focus on the knower as a socially contextualized individual who may learn and hold values that allow them to be an ethical person who contributes in a meaningful way, whether that be small or large, to their community. The critical thinker is someone who can process information and respond, thoughtfully as well as compassionately, to the context in which they find themselves.

Siegel (2009) gives this definition:

> A critical thinker is one who is (1) able to reason well – to construct and evaluate reasons and arguments for and against candidate beliefs, judgements and actions; and (2) disposed to believe, judge and act in accordance with such reasoned evaluations. (p. 80)

These thinking skills may be applied to all subjects and to real life situations. They are powerful tools that allow people to ask questions such 'as what is Truth?'; 'How can I be sure of what I know and believe?'; 'Should I doubt what I am being told?' We do not always find the one perfect answer to questions such as these, but questioning, and attempting to answer these questions leads us closer to the truth; closer to a better answer and helps us to rule out the worst answers. It also leaves the door open to new ideas, and new evidence. In this way we learn and grow as we discover more about the world, and about ideas that matter to us. In this way, to paraphrase the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, we come to know ourselves. The Self which I am referring to does not live in isolation. We are social selves, a group of learners.

The Cultural DeCoding program is an example of one way of encouraging such critical thinking in response to a range of disciples in the humanities. In every Australian school, a poster outlines the nine National Values for Australian Schooling; it quotes George Eliot in stating 'Character is destiny'. These days, there is a lot of pressure on teachers and parents to raise good people; to shape and nurture the character of those students and children with whom they come into contact. This focus on character instead of rule-following means that people need to be taught general thinking skills that will apply to any context, as rote learning rules which cannot be broken is not useful, particularly in a fast-paced and changing global, technological world.

A particular value of studying subjects in the humanities, including philosophy, theology and aesthetics, is that the critical, creative and caring thinking that is promoted is applied in an experiential manner as described by the pragmatism of John Dewey (1934; 2008). Learning is thus an embodied experience which students make their way through, and apply to their own lives, rather than a purely disembodied rational exercise that results in the one 'correct' answer. There are pedagogical advantages to offering extension programs in the humanities to gifted and talented students. By placing values alongside an outcomes-based approach to education, we realise that, in order to live well and make good decisions, the focus on the person learning and their character is vital. It is in this way that teaching children thinking skills through the Cultural DeCoding program may assist in creating powerful, engaged, and compassionate citizens. This is a goal that is shared with P4C practitioners and advocates of philosophy in the schools.

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