



Philosophy Program Benefits Teachers and Students

By John H. Tucker

Two years ago, high school freshman Jacob Pearce was a frustrated student with so-so grades who wasted his time watching too much television. "I was looking for a sense of purpose," says Pearce, now a 16-year-old junior at Elizabeth Irwin High School in the West Village.

Pearce says he's found that purpose—in the form of philosophy.

Most high schools don't offer philosophy courses, but a new Columbia outreach program—conceived by graduate students here—is filling that void. "Critical thinking has given me a sense of context," says Pearce, who earned straight As—and one B—in his last grading period. "I have a deeper understanding of characters in books, which helps me write better essays. In math, I don't try and memorize formulas anymore. Instead, I try to understand why they work."

Beginning this year, students from 10 area high schools can attend philosophical discussion groups led by graduate students enrolled in Columbia's philosophy department and Teachers College. The program is one of only four such initiatives in the United States, say organizers. Similar programs are run out of the University of North Carolina, the University of Colorado and New York University.

"It's exhilarating to take philosophy out of the ivory tower and put it into action," said doctoral student Tim Ignaffo.

The weekly sessions occur in classrooms, coffee shops, parks and pizza parlors. High school students reflect on issues relevant to their daily lives, rather than complex theories posited by ancient Greeks, such as: "Do I have a responsibility to turn in a friend who did something wrong?" "How can I be a better teammate on the basketball court?" "Do I need a boyfriend to be happy?" The discussions are supported with relevant texts like Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. Since September, about 75 high school students from four boroughs have attended.

"These teenagers get exciting presentations of ideas they aren't normally taught in high school," says Philip Kitcher, a program adviser and the John Dewey Professor of Philosophy and James R. Barker Professor of Contemporary Civilization. "My sense is that many of them find large parts of their curricula fairly hum-

drum and are invigorated by our dynamic graduate students."

Little research exists to prove that teenagers' engagement in philosophical discourse improves academic performance, but there's plenty of anecdotal evidence pointing to benefits, such as critical thinking, logic, speech and motivation, organizers say.

"Philosophy is one of the only subjects in high school where students feel like their own opinions matter—where it's not just about memorizing material and spouting it back," says Roberta Israeloff, director of the Squire Foundation, an advocacy group for ethics education. The Squire Foundation endowed Columbia with a grant to get the program going, which was matched by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center and the Teachers College Department of Arts and Humanities.

Before the grant, Columbia graduate students funded the program on their own. They still don't earn academic credit, but they say they're happy to sharpen their teaching skills. "I was completely impressed that these students were doing this on their own initiative," says Israeloff. "It was so altruistic."

Philosophy doctoral student Sebastian Watzl, one of the program's founders, says he was motivated to launch an outreach program after his teenage cousins began ribbing him for pursuing a subject they considered too abstract. Watzl, from Nuremberg, Germany, says it's no coincidence that half of the program's organizers hail from Europe, where philosophy class is mandatory in most high schools.

After receiving approval from the University, Watzl, Ignaffo and their classmates started cold-calling principals around the city. Four high schools

agreed to participate when the program started last spring, and with the recent addition of Frederick Douglass Academy in Morningside Heights, there are now 10. One doctoral student runs weekly clubs for teenagers at Riker's Island Correctional Facility.

Apart from weekly clubs, the organizers provide high schools with tailor-made lectures that complement specific subjects. Columbia student Michael Seifried, for example, studies the philosophy of science and is often asked to substitute teach biology and chemistry classes, where he lectures about scientific ethics.

"High schoolers are much more capable than we realize of extremely advanced thinking," says Seifried.



Experts See Bumps Along the Economic Road

By Joel Stonington

Four top scholars at a recent roundtable at Columbia were clear on the big picture: Politics are hindering the nation's economic recovery. Professors Joseph Stiglitz, Alan Brinkley, Robert Skidelsky and Harold James agreed that government is failing to take relief efforts far enough but couldn't agree on the economic policies needed to end the recession.

The discussion, billed as "The Great Recession in Historical Perspective," was framed, in part, by a political clash from the last century between Franklin Delano Roosevelt liberals, who believe greater governmental control helps problematic markets, and Ronald Reagan conservatives, who believe that government intervention in markets is the main hindrance to a high-functioning economy.

"We're seeing the nemesis of the Reagan view," said Skidelsky, a University of Warwick professor emeritus. Panel members agreed that markets did not function properly in the run-up to the Great Recession as securitization—loans converted to bonds, valued and traded—became a broader phenomenon and helped cause the collapse of the housing market.

The resulting credit crunch and a string of bank failures were similar to that of the Great Depression. Harold James, Princeton University professor of history and international affairs, however, drew similarities between the current downturn and the lesser-known European banking collapse of 1931, in which governments were unable to prop up major financial institutions.

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"The United States had a particular answer to the Great Depression that was innovative and responsible," James said, speaking of the banking collapse, "but many other countries had really terrible answers."

Some of those answers are being repeated today, the scholars said. There was no question among the group that current economic models are flawed, and not one of them believes that the downturn is over. Indeed, the discussion confronted many of the central tenets of economics, such as whether economics is even a science.

Stiglitz provoked laughter from the standing-room-only crowd when he joked that mainstream economists suggest that rising unemployment simply means more people are seeking leisure.

Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics and a professor at Columbia, sounded the alarm that the government would cut off stimulus spending due to deficit fears, which would lead to an economic recovery turning into another recession.

Stiglitz and Brinkley said the size of the deficit was dangerous, while Skidelsky, who has written a biography of British economist John Maynard Keynes, responded that fears of the deficit were being played up for political reasons. The scholars were similarly split on what the Great Recession will mean for globalization. Stiglitz said a globally integrated recovery was necessary for the recovery of individual countries, while James saw dangerous signs in the recovery. "The whole story I see is trending toward re-nationalization of finance," he said, warning that similar economic and political radicalism of the 1930s led directly to World War II.

The panel was in agreement that current political realities on both a national and international scale bode ill for a recovery. Stiglitz was the last to speak. He said the downturn is not over, and while Wall Street seems to have returned to business as usual, the rest of the country is not back to normal. Expect crises in other countries, he said, and a lot of bumps on the road ahead.



Little Camera, Big Idea

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create something that could be used as a platform for education across many societies."

Nayar, chair of computer science at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, worked on Bigshot for two years. The project is an extension of his work as director of SEAS's Computer Vision Lab, where he has expertise in highly sensitive cameras. Among his inventions is the Omnicam, a video camera that shoots seamless 360-degree images, and a technology—recently developed in collaboration with Sony—that extends the range of brightness and color that cameras can capture.

But, as the father of two young children, he wanted to have an impact beyond the high-tech sector on a humanitarian level. He was inspired by the 2005 Oscar-winning documentary *Born Into Brothels*, which depicts the lives of children growing up in Calcutta's red-light district. The filmmaker, British photographer Zana Briski, gave 35 mm film cameras to eight children and watched as those cameras transformed their lives.

"The film reaffirmed something I've believed for a long time, which is that the camera, as a piece of technology, has a very special place in society," says Nayar, who grew up in New Delhi. "It allows us to express ourselves and to communicate with each other in a very powerful way."

With the Bigshot, Nayar wants to not only empower children and encourage their creative vision, but also get them excited about science. Each building block of the camera is designed to teach a basic concept of physics: why light bends when it passes through a transparent object, how mechanical energy is converted into electrical energy, how a gear train works.

Nayar would like to roll out the camera, now in prototype form, along the lines of the One Laptop Per Child campaign: For each one sold at the full price of around \$100, several would be donated to underprivileged schools in the

United States and abroad. He will soon begin looking for a partner—a company or nonprofit—to help put Bigshot into production.

In the meantime, Nayar, Krishnan, Tran and Smith have been field-testing the camera with children around the world. Over the summer, Krishnan and Tran took several Bigshot prototypes to their hometowns: Bangalore, India, and Vung Tau, Vietnam, respectively. Nayar also brought the camera to two New York City schools, the private School at Columbia and the public Mott Hall school in Harlem.

Each spent a morning teaching several small groups of children how to assemble the cameras; after lunch, their charges went out to take pictures. The response from the kids was one of overwhelming enthusiasm. "They were ready to buy the camera then and there," says Krishnan. "One offered me 10,000 rupees (\$200)." More importantly, tests that Nayar and his team gave out two days later showed that the students had retained the science concepts that Bigshot was expected to teach.

For Nayar, the best part of this experience has been looking at the pictures. "I am addicted to the pictures; I can't get enough of them," he says. "The fact that some of the kids were using a camera for the first time, and they were able to frame what they thought was important and capture that moment so beautifully, was really remarkable."

It's an experience he hopes to bring to many more children, locally and globally.

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For a video on the Bigshot camera, go to news.columbia.edu/global