What is Philosophy for Children, What is Philosophy with Children—After Matthew Lipman?

NANCY VANSIELEGHEM AND DAVID KENNEDY

Philosophy for Children arose in the 1970s in the US as an educational programme. This programme, initiated by Matthew Lipman, was devoted to exploring the relationship between the notions ‘philosophy’ and ‘childhood’, with the implicit practical goal of establishing philosophy as a full-fledged ‘content area’ in public schools. Over 40 years, the programme has spread worldwide, and the theory and practice of doing philosophy for or with children and young people appears to be of growing interest in the field of education and, by implication, in society as a whole. This article focuses on this growing interest by offering a survey of the main arguments and ideas that have given shape to the idea of philosophy for children in recent decades. This aim is twofold: first, to make more familiar an actual educational practice that is not at all well known in the field of academic philosophy itself; and second, to invite a re-thinking of the relationship between philosophy and the child ‘after Lipman’.

Philosophy for Children\(^1\) arose in the 1970s in the US as an educational programme, initiated by Matthew Lipman (1922–2010), which was devoted to exploring the relationship between the notions ‘philosophy’ and ‘childhood’, with the implicit practical goal of establishing philosophy as a full-fledged ‘content area’ in US public schools—a goal that has, with time, become an increasingly distant one. This is not so much the case in the UK, Europe and Latin America, however, where the theory and practice of doing philosophy for or with school age children appears to be of growing both interest and concern in the field of education and, by implication, in society as a whole. Examples of this emergent interest can be found not only in the growing number of curriculum materials published in this area, but in the many workshops and teacher training courses devoted to practical philosophy that are organised for educational practitioners, managers and teacher trainers.

This special issue focuses on the emergence of this ‘philosophy/child’ relation, and more precisely, on the horizon against which it has been born and has taken shape. We attempt to locate the arguments that make it
reasonable to think through the relationship between philosophy and the child, and that clarify its significance for teaching and learning today. Our aim is twofold: first, to become familiar with an actual educational practice that is not at all well known in the field of academic philosophy itself; and second, to offer an invitation to rethink the relationship between philosophy and the child ‘after Lipman’. In this article, and as a means of contextualising the different contributions to this issue, we provide an introduction to some of the main arguments and ideas that have given shape to the idea of philosophy for children in recent decades. In doing so, we follow Ronald Reed and Tony Johnson (1999) in subdividing the history of the movement into a first and a second generation. Characteristic of the first generation was its emphasis on a strategic uniformity of approach, given its ambitions for a place in public schooling, while the second broke with this mode of thinking, and welcomed difference as a principle of growth. This in fact fits our own purposes, in that we are interested in envisaging philosophy for children not so much as a totality, but rather as an assemblage of moving elements that forms a particular horizon— and thus as ‘some-thing’ that is in movement and can turn toward thought (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 38). Hence, in what follows we focus not on one particular author or on one ideological or methodological subgroup within the movement, but rather attempt, first, to map the epistemological and pedagogical discourses within which this set of discourses emerged.

ON PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: A FIRST GENERATION

In Modelle und Perspektiven der Kinderphilosophie (1997) Stephan Englhart refers to three different horizons through which philosophy for children became a matter of educational interest in the 1970s. We begin with Matthew Lipman, whose arguments for the need for such a programme were based on a notion of critical thinking that was strongly influenced by the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey. Enabled by Lipman’s initiative, but migrating into a different but related discourse, Gareth Matthews approached the issue more from a philosopher’s than an educator’s point of view, and introduced a notion of philosophical dialogue with children that was grounded in the adult appreciation of a child’s inherent sense of wonder. Matthews (1980) emphasised the need to rethink the child, not as an ignorant being, but as a rational agent who already has the capacity to reason philosophically, and he thereby opened a space for the emergent field of what is now known as philosophy of childhood (Matthews, 1994; Kennedy, 1992). This moment of confluence was clearly marked by a symposium held at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1980, in which both Matthews and Lipman presented papers,2 which were addressed by three respondents. These were published in 1981 in a double issue of Lipman’s journal Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children (2, 3 and 4), accompanied by a rich literary compendium of childhood memoir, poetry,

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and philosophical and psychoanalytic reflection. Finally, following on these two related approaches, another emerged that understood philosophy for children as a means for reconstructing relations of power and agency in the classroom, and for communicating and reflecting upon personal meanings, with a goal of facilitating the self-actualisation of conscious moral actors. In what follows we offer a brief overview of these different lines of argument.

P4C AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The growing interest in critical thinking that emerged at the end of the 1970s was based on the conviction that an emphasis on reasoning was a necessary element of any deep-structural educational reform, and that the introduction of philosophy into the content of schooling represented the one best curricular and pedagogical hope for bringing that element forth in the culture and practice of schooling. The most important representative of this approach at this time was Matthew Lipman, who developed the philosophical novel *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* (1974), which, whatever its literary merits, established a new genre—the philosophical novel for children—with a single stroke. *Harry* represents the attempt to construct a pedagogical tool that functions as a model for critical thinking by describing ‘real life’ children engaged in critical dialogue about philosophical issues, with the goal of stimulating the same sort of dialogue among groups of students. At the same moment, several approaches—a revival of Leonard Nelson’s Socratic Method, in particular—emerged that shared Lipman’s assumption that the stimulation of communal critical thinking led to an improvement of thinking in the individual. Beyond that similarity, however, Nelson (1882–1927) and Lipman differed in their epistemic assumptions.

While Nelson’s ‘philosophical truth’ is located at the foundation of experience, Lipman adopted an evolutionary view of knowledge. Following Kant, Nelson believed that knowledge from observation presupposes the application of categories that are not to be found through empirical inquiry but are already present in the person and determine experience itself. Thinking, in other words, is not derived purely from our experience; rather, our experience is structured and made possible by thinking. Nelson followed Kant in holding to the categories of *a priori* thinking but differed in his claim that these *a priori* categories cannot be proven. It is substance and causality not just in the external world that are knowable by induction, but in the inner world as well. For Nelson, knowledge of the truth is internal, is traceable in and through the conceptual presuppositions of everyday experience, and is gained by regressive abstraction from those experiences. As such, truth can be brought to light by a ‘psychological factum’ (Nelson, [1975] 1994), which entails introspection and the painstaking dissection of one’s own experience. The search for a common order of things is no longer

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undertaken on the level of human nature, but is based on the connections that materialise in the experience of the individual person. It is as if the truth is present in everyone but needs to be made transparent through the method of regressive abstraction. Here we are dealing with a specific methodology that shows step-by-step how a person can achieve objective knowledge concerning her own thinking.

In his interpretation of the Socratic method Lipman turned not to Kant but to pragmatism. Although the trunk and branches of Lipman’s programme can be identified with G. H. Mead, Lev Vygotsky, C. S. Pierce and Justus Buchler, its roots are clearly in the philosophical writings of Dewey (Lipman, 1996, pp. xi-xv). Lipman began with Dewey’s idea that there is no distinction between the mind and the external world and, as a consequence, between philosophical truth and scientific truth (cf. Daniel, 1992; McCall, 2009, p. 102). Influenced by Darwin, Dewey had developed an evolutionary view of knowledge, which implies an ongoing adaptive human response to a changing environment. As a consequence, and in line with Dewey, knowledge for Lipman is not static, but the emergent product of a ceaseless interaction with the environment. Dewey used the word ‘experience’ to explain this interaction, and understood thinking as reflection on the consequences of this interaction, and thereby on the possibilities of further experience. Dewey wrote: ‘Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence—a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each outcome in turn leans back on, or refers to, its predecessors’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 4).

What this means is that thinking enables persons to become aware of the consequences of their actions and thereby to reconstruct those habits from which actions follow. This does not imply that success is guaranteed; but because we have nothing at our disposal that offers us more certainty than the outcome of reflection, it is incumbent upon us to strengthen the reflective quality of our feelings and our actions, however counterintuitive that may appear to ‘common sense’. While Dewey connected this effort to the ongoing reconstruction of habit through experience, Lipman went further and emphasised the efficacy of formal logic in the formation of judgments and the growth of ‘reasonableness’ (see Daniel, 1992). This is not merely about mapping diverse possibilities that may be realised but about the search for possible incorrect presuppositions in the activity of thinking. Accordingly, for Lipman, critical thinking means being able to determine the facts or issues (including ideas, concepts and theories) that cause a problem in order to make hypotheses about how to solve it. Moreover, the logic of the development of knowledge in a given environment and the application of knowledge for the improvement of the quality of living became the horizon against which Lipman’s Philosophy for Children programme took shape. Accordingly, the aim of P4C for Lipman ‘is not to turn children into philosophers or decision makers, but to help them become more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate, and more reasonable individuals. Children who have been helped to become more judicious not only have a better sense of when to act but also
of when not to act’ (Lipman et al., 1980, p. 15). Against this background, philosophy is no longer regarded as a theoretical activity separated from the world, but rather as a potential that has to (and can) be developed in order to get a grip on one’s interactions with one’s environment, and to influence change.

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AS A MEANS OF CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN THE ADULT AND THE CHILD

A second line of argument that entered the discourse on philosophy for children at the end of the 1970s focuses on the emergent topos of the philosophy of childhood. In these approaches, which are often described as Romantic, the notion of childhood as merely a prelude to adulthood is problematised. These studies, amongst which the work of Gareth Matthews is particularly prominent, criticise traditional education for limiting its focus to the transfer of knowledge and, thus, underrating the voice of the child. ‘Children can help us adults investigate and reflect on interesting and important questions and . . . the children’s contributions may be quite as valuable as any we adults have to offer’ (Matthews, 1984, p. 3). Matthews explicitly strives for a symmetrical relation between the adult and the child, and approaches the child as an equal companion in thought. Therefore he does not speak about philosophy for or with children, but rather ‘dialogues with children’, and argues that children ask the same questions as philosophers do, although differently formulated.

In his book Philosophy and the Young Child (1984), Matthews launched a philosophical critique of Piaget’s claim that young children are ‘pre-logical’ and incapable of what Piaget called ‘formal operations’. In so doing, he was in effect questioning the foundational genetic epistemology of the American educational establishment, whose teachers were (and are) socialised from the start into a naive version of developmental, Piagetian discrete stage theory, which itself has been the object of criticism among cognitive scientists for decades (see Brainerd, 1978). Matthews argued that Piaget’s theory displayed an ‘evolutionary bias’ in assuming that the goal of development is maturity, and that each stage of development represents an advance (Matthews, 1994, p. 17). This does not hold for the development of philosophical intelligence, Matthews suggests, and in fact the opposite may be the case: children are likely to ask more interesting questions than adults. ‘The standard response’, he writes, ‘is, in general an unthinking and un-thought-out product of socialisation, whereas the nonconforming response is much more likely to be the fruit of honest reflection. Yet Piaget would have the nonconforming response discounted and eliminated on methodological grounds’ (Matthews, 1980, p. 38).

Correlatively, Matthews argues that the central mission of the school should be to create spaces in which children can articulate and explore their own interpretations of the world and bring these into dialogue with others. Critical thinking means not so much instrumental problem-solving as the capacity and the disposition to fantasise and to wonder, to entertain
profound ideas about the world and to confront problems concerning individual well-being. Logical thinking skills are not emphasised in this approach, or even the discovery of inconsistencies or contradictions in ideas, but rather philosophy as a form of desire—of the opportunity for children to explore and articulate what they have not said or even thought before. As such, philosophy’s boundaries shift under the influence of childhood, and it opens itself to the expression even of what can *not* be said, thus intersecting in its practice with art, psychotherapy and what Pierre Hadot called *askesis*, or ‘spiritual exercise’ (Hadot, 1995). Thus, the experience of interacting philosophically with children results in a profound critique of the normative adult view of the child and of its expression in the ‘science as usual’ of developmental psychology, which becomes exposed as a sort of epistemic ideology immersed in a discourse that is unaware of its own philosophical assumptions (see Polakow, 1982). In fact this critique finds its justification in developmental psychology with the arrival in the West, contemporary with Lipman’s pioneering innovation, of Vygotskian learning theory, which represents a challenge to Piagetian stage theory that has not yet been internalised by institutionalised education, not surprisingly perhaps, given its structural asymmetry with traditional educational assumptions and practices.

**P4C AS A STRATEGY TO RECONSTRUCT MECHANISMS OF POWER AND TO COMMUNICATE AND REFLECT UPON PERSONAL MEANINGS**

Although clearly related to the previous lines of reasoning, a third (Englhart, 1997, p. 138) is to be found in the attempt to strive for a more human world—that is, a world that is free from any preordained orientation to what constitutes human thinking and action. Here philosophy appears as a form of communal deliberation that stimulates critical reflection on existing power relations, these being envisaged as historical constructions that are or should be open to reconstruction. An exploration of these constructs is expected to bring into the light the invisible relationships of power that inform them, thereby neutralising their force. This project calls for a form of education whose fundamental discursive engine is dialogue, which privileges inquiry over instruction and the multilogical rather over the monological. Dialogue as a form of speech inherently resists the reification of ideas or practices and trades instead on clarifying essences, postponing judgements, working with ambiguities and interrogating assumptions, these being achieved through dyadic or group deliberation. Its discursive goal is the installation of a Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’, a free space in which all persons involved in the inquiry have an equal chance to bring their arguments forward in the interest of an emergent, rationally founded consensus. Ekkehard Martens (1999), one of the proponents of this approach, writes that children need to learn that there are different orientations possible, that no orientation can be claimed as the only one, and that the practice of
philosophical inquiry is necessary in order to learn to think beyond totality, dualism and exclusionary categories.

Martens suggest that two dimensions need to be present in designing a philosophical curriculum and pedagogy for children: on the one hand, motivational content, or what he calls ‘homerian themes as food for their souls to grow’, and, on the other, a critical method of thinking modelled on the dialogical style of Socrates, identified as a ‘philosophical spoilsport’ or ‘gadfly’ (Martens, 1999, p. 138). This approach finds the value of philosophy in its capacity to encourage a historically sensitive, trans-cultural approach to knowledge, in the interest of refining students’ powers of detailed analysis and their ability to reach judgements through communicative action based on collaborative interpretation. This also presumes an emphasis on the cultivation of the art of speaking (rhetoric), questioning (dialectic) and writing (grammar), and the strengthening of casuistic reasoning in service of ethical action. Here thinking for oneself implies that one takes responsibility for one’s actions, and it assumes that the capacity for responsible action is an outcome of growth in philosophical knowledge and procedures. Philosophy is then understood as a means of increasing the potential power of children (who are defined as essentially vulnerable) in order to neutralise unequal power relations by strengthening processes of communication and cooperation.

A SECOND GENERATION OF PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: A ‘METHOD’ BECOMES ‘A MOVEMENT’

Today a second generation of ‘P4C-representatives’ has emerged within the discourse of philosophy for children—including, among others, Ann Margaret Sharp, David Kennedy, Karin Murris, Walter Kohan, Michel Sasseville, Joanna Haynes, Jen Glaser, Oscar Brenifier, Michel Tozzi, Marina Santi, Barbara Weber and Philip Cam—in whose work received ideas have been called into question and new thinking has taken form. It is characteristic of this generation that these new ideas are not considered an attack on its predecessors but as a necessary step that takes into account the changing circumstances of the global and educational environment and, hence, are understood as a form of self-correction. Ronald Reed and Tony Johnson write, for example:

Given the rise of post modernity, one simply does not do philosophy the way one did it forty years ago. The assumptions about truth, perspective, nature and so on have, at least, been challenged, thereby forcing attempts at justification and explanation that were considered unnecessary in previous days. To the extent that philosophy has an impact on everyday experience, to that extent the debate has had practical consequences (Reed and Johnson, 1999, pp. 64–65).

The most obvious object of the second generation’s critique is Lipman’s strong emphasis on analytical reasoning as a guarantee for critical thinking. As Karel Van der Leeuw puts it, ‘In the novels, but especially in
the accompanying manuals, stress on analytical skills, reasoning, categorizing, ordering, and so on, is pervasive. It is not immediately apparent, however, how improvement of analytical skills is conductive to the discovery of meaning’ (Van der Leeuw, 2009, p. 111). In addition, the regressive, instrumentalist structure and discourse of 21st century Western traditional schooling is understood as particularly antithetical to the goals and purposes of philosophy for children. ‘Reflection and reasoning’, van der Leeuw suggests, ‘can’t be realized when we only reserve separate hours a week for a collective exploration of philosophical questions’ (p. 112). He argues that, in our changing information society,

... we expect people to be able to reflect rationally on human life, which includes a view of reality, of the place of the individual in society, of values and norms, of the meaning of life and so on. [And] ... we expect them to be able to communicate these views to others, because we live in a common reality, and this common reality must be the subject of common discourse, and can even be regarded as a common construct (Van der Leeuw, 2009, p. 113).

Accordingly, philosophy is not perceived primarily as a provider either of skills or ‘answers’—whether in the realm of fact or value—but as a site in which students can determine what the important questions for our time are, and where they can seek their own answers through the practice of thinking for themselves and with others in communal deliberation. ‘Every generation’, Van der Leeuw claims, ‘has to find answers, because the world is changing and widening’ (ibid.). What is needed, on this account, is an integrated educational system with an infrastructure that offers opportunities for reflective thinking and communication and that will serve to prepare us for the inevitable transformation in our attitudes towards knowledge. As such, the central mission of the school is to teach children how to think and communicate: to train them how to reflect upon knowledge on their own.

Striving for unity and consistency, and subjugating our thinking to logical categories or to universal reason, are no longer, for this second generation, ends-in-themselves. In consequence, we find that speculations about methods and approaches tend to be contextualised to particular communities, and the only broad consensus that does exist is that philosophy for children is about promoting the exchange of rational argument and thoughtful opinion. There is, however, no longer understood to be one best way of reasoning, for collective reason, it is held, is shaped and articulated by the social community in which it operates. Now philosophy for children becomes philosophy with children. The change in the preposition is an important index of difference: it betokens a still greater emphasis on dialogue as fundamental and indispensable to the pedagogy of philosophy, which is no longer understood as the modelling and coaching of an ideal of analytical reason, but as what generates communal reflection, contemplation and communication. In this respect, the second generation will no longer speak about philosophy for or with children in terms of a method, but rather as a movement encompassing a
medley of approaches, each with its own methods, techniques and strategies.

Now it may be suggested that the logic of ‘what works’ is bound to be marked by aspects of what has been called, following Michel Foucault, the ‘biopolitical structure of society’. Understood as an adaptation—or capitulation—to biopower, whatever critical potential philosophy for children carries, and whatever notion of freedom it endorses, have come to be associated with a particular work upon the self—a work that is oriented to the fulfilment of human needs or desires in a community. On this account, a particular subject(ivity) comes to the fore in the discourses of philosophy with children themselves—a subject who looks at her life in terms of a process that can be managed and who experiences philosophy as an efficient tool for that purpose (see Vansielegheem and Masschelein, 2010). In this respect it could be said that philosophy for children, whatever its efforts to resist doing so, has not remained unaffected by the general cultural movement that has replaced critique with sales promotion, reinforcing our dependence on an exploitative apparatus that, in satisfying our needs, perpetuates our servitude (see Marcuse, 1964). Biopower seeks a totality, and philosophy for children may be both an instrument and an effect of a power that generates a totalising vision not only for a child but also for a people and humankind as a whole.

On the other hand, it could be argued, in the light of Foucault’s (2005) final turn to the ‘care of the self’ as an ethical practice, that the practice of philosophy for children represents a dispositif in the service of an emergent form of subjectivity, a ‘global class formation’ (2004, p. xvii) that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004, 2009), following Spinoza, call ‘multitude’. Here they reformulate the concept of biopolitics as the form of collectivity of ‘altermodernity’ (2009, pp. 101–118), a collectivity of singularities for which the articulation between the social and the political grows ever more intense: the innovative and creative capacities that capitalism demands for its expansion produce forms of resistance to capitalism, intensities that manage from within it to produce alternative expressions’ (2004, p. 263), and through which ‘the multitude can develop the power to organize itself through the conflictual and cooperative interactions of singularities in the common’ (2009, p. 175). ‘Communication’, they argue, ‘is productive, not only of economic values but also of subjectivity, and thus communication is central to biopolitical production’ (p. 263). This is to suggest that the discursive form that characterises philosophy for children—communal dialogue in an ideal speech situation—is inherently subversive of the goals of biopower, and as such represents a sort of Trojan Horse wheeled into the ideological state apparatus of Western schooling.

RETHINKING PHILOSOPHY/CHILDHOOD—AFTER LIPMAN

Against the backdrop of these multiple views on the implications of philosophy for children as a discourse, a methodology, a philosophical
enterprise, and a form of biopolitical production, this special issue is the outcome of an invitation to think the project philosophy/childhood, childhood/philosophy again and anew. After all, what philosophy for children may become is by no means a given: it is, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might put this, created rather than formed, as is made clear by the shifts that our brief genealogy has charted. Hence, philosophy for children does not just appear as a solution to a problem. It emerges within a given field of experience, where it combines with other coexisting theories and practices that gives it a history and a determination as well as constituting it as an opening to something new. Thus, this collection of articles takes note not only of the question of what philosophy for children is, but of what determines its moment of emergence, the particular conditions of that emergence, and of what remains unknown as well—and this not only at a theoretical level but also in the spaces of concrete educational practice. There are contributions here not only by friends of philosophy for children but also by its doubters and antagonists as well, thus opening a space for confrontation and challenge to received views. We would like to think of this special issue as an intervention that creates the possibility of verifying and affirming philosophy for children as a possible theory and practice—as a theory and practice that has a history and that has linked up with other theories and practices, that corresponds to other concepts and presupposes other philosophies and other subjectivities. Moreover philosophy for children will not be presented as a well-defined occupation and more or less precisely circumscribed activity, but rather as a concept that is created and that remains subject to the constraints of renewal, replacement and mutation. As a result, the articles collected here are not simply analyses, interpretations or conceptual clarifications: what they offer is not a presentation of philosophy for children as an object of knowledge: it is the presentation of a subject that is subjective. Hence, this special issue is an attempt to think philosophy for children beyond existing representations and to create thereby a hyper-representation, from which new meanings, new forms of social expression, new forms of empowerment, new forms of encounter and new forms of collective action may emerge.

Correspondence: Nancy Vansieleghem, Department of The Foundations of Education, Ghent University, Belgium; David K. Kennedy, Department of Educational Foundations, Montclair State University, Montclair NJ 07042, USA.
Emails: Nancy.Vansieleghem@UGent.be; kennedyd@mail.montclair.edu

NOTES
1. The use of the term ‘philosophy for children’—now commonly ‘P4C’—has been the subject of some contention, especially among European practitioners, for two reasons: (i) the term, it is claimed, rightly describes one particular curricular programme, developed and published by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, and therefore should not be used
generically; (ii) the word ‘for’, it is alleged, has certain paternalistic connotations, implying that the activity is something that adults provide for children, or furnish them with, as opposed to something they practise with them. In consequence, many consider the term ‘philosophy with children’ more appropriate. Here and throughout this special issue we have used three forms of the term, depending on the author and the context: ‘Philosophy for Children’ when referring to the IAPC programme in particular, and either ‘philosophy for children’, ‘philosophy with children’ or ‘philosophy for/with children’, depending on the author’s preference.

2. Lipman’s paper was entitled ‘Developing Philosophies of Childhood’, and Mathews’, ‘Childhood: The Recapitulation Model’.

3. Matthews and Lipman were, in turn, challenged directly by the philosophical establishment in the person of Richard Kitchener, who attended that same meeting of the APA in 1980, where he argued in Piagetian terms against children’s capacity to do philosophy. He later published a paper summarising his arguments (Kitchener, 1990), which was followed by an even more exhaustive critique by John White (1992). The arguments of both papers were contested by Karin Murris (1999) in the pages of this journal.

4. In fact, Lipman offered a ‘prototype’ of philosophical community of inquiry that included five steps or stages (the ‘offering of the text’, the ‘construction of the agenda’, etc.) the last of which calls for the ‘eliciting of further responses in the form of telling or writing stories, poetry, painting, drawing . . .’ (Lipman, 2003, pp. 101–103).

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