

The Real Reason Students Should Study Philosophy

Isn't philosophy supposed to help people *live well*, not just exercise the mind? That was the ancient view.

The evidence is clear that exposure to philosophical questions, ideas, and dialogue at an early age improves academic outcomes generally, and in particular cultivates the skills needed for reasoned dialogue. (Intellectual Takeout has posted several pieces to that effect; see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

But if that were all there is to it, we'd be reducing philosophy to its utility value. Most philosophers, and not a few non-philosophers, would see that as a serious mistake. So, what is philosophy for children (P4C) and high-school students ultimately...well, *for*?

For millennia, the answer had been simple: to gain wisdom. As many readers know, the very word 'philosophy' was coined in ancient Greece to mean "love of wisdom." But there are different kinds of wisdom. Not everybody can cultivate each kind equally well.

There's *practical wisdom* in the narrow sense of the term, which means knowing how to handle the practical demands of life. Many adults exhibit that capacity without having practical wisdom in the broader sense: the capacity to make good decisions not just about what we'd call "practical" matters, but also and especially about *moral* and *spiritual* matters.

These individuals are "successful" in a sense, but they are not living good lives overall. Aristotle's word for practical wisdom in the broad sense was *phronesis*. Exercising that virtue, he thought, is essential to living a "happy" life—and

if you've really got it, you've got pretty much all the other virtues too.

A really good life, though, isn't just or even primarily about having a good time. Indeed, making the pursuit of pleasure one's primary goal in life tends to work out badly for all concerned. Some people live rich, beautiful lives despite (and in some cases because of) the considerable suffering they experienced.

A pair of researchers, Australian Laura D'Olimpio and New Zealander Christoph Teschers, co-authored a [paper](#) offering a perspective from which one could integrate the largely utilitarian goals of P4C, a well-known curriculum, with a wider "art-of-living" approach that they describe in detail. If followed in a step-wise, age-appropriate way, that integration can enrich and energize philosophical pedagogy.

Despite their plodding academic prose, the researchers have made a good case based on the literature they cite. Here's their conclusion:

The shared benefit of the art of living approach and philosophy in schools is that of a holistic approach to education...These skills are not simply to master exams and regurgitate facts, but rather to live beautiful lives as lifelong learners. This holistic educational approach, we argue, has to go beyond skills that are currently in demand by industry and economy. Today's education systems, where young people spend a significant part of their daily lives, have a huge impact on students' development and futures. These futures should not be determined or unduly limited by current economic or political agendas. Education, understood here as the empowerment of (young) students to develop their own art of living, seeks to help students think for themselves and take responsibility for their own future choices.

That's a tall order. But in an increasingly fractious and fractured society, aiming for its goal is more important than ever.

—

[Image Credit: Public Domain/Pixabay]