Socrates Seen in Ontario High Schools (And He Has Not Left the Building!)

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Abstract

Philosophy is a relatively new subject in Ontario high schools, and the teacher education programs that serve this subject area are even newer. It is laudable that high school students have this opportunity, especially since the intellectual habits of critical thinking and healthy skepticism that philosophy promotes run counter to the traditional educational experiences that students have in many other subjects. However, very little is known about how teachers imagine their role and the “proper outcomes” of this course. We examine interview data concerning how high school philosophy teachers conceptualize their ideal pedagogical aims. This question goes to the heart of why these courses are so important because curriculum is always filtered through teachers’ interpretations of it and the aims of education. Teachers look to Socratic questioning and critical thinking as the paragon of philosophical habits, but their responses reveal that “institutional constraints” and “sources of bias” pose two major impediments to this ideal. We focus on these impediments to underscore the importance of the teacher’s role and efforts in philosophy classes and to encourage those in teacher education to take them seriously in designing courses in the new “teachable subject area” of philosophy in Ontario faculties of education.

Socrates apparently held that the unexamined life is not worth living. Perhaps this “Socratic injunction” is hyperbole—perhaps not. Surely, it must be the case, however, that some critical reflection on one’s life is a good thing and that the capacity to do so is partly constitutive of what makes us human. Unfortunately, in pursuing this matter and exercising this capacity, one must face and overcome many impediments in the kind of society that we live in today. These impediments include: the fast pace of life; forms of media that thrive on superficiality and very short attention spans; the pressures of work and making money in a consumer society; electronic forms of social interchange that seem to require immediate attention to multiple messages daily, institutional structures and loyalties that work against critical reflection; a rampant anti-intellectualism among both

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politicians and the electorate (and some educators); and an educational system that seems increasingly oriented to job preparation, global competition, standardization, and instrumental, elitist assessment of student performance. According to Plato, Socrates stood out among his peers in insisting on bucking the analogous impediments to his injunction that were prevalent in his society and time; for example, he refused to take money from those willing to learn from him, and he refused to reduce good argument to successful rhetorical persuasion, practices common to the Sophists into whose company he was probably initially lumped by most who heard of him. In fact, he was so successful in following his own injunction that we still regard him as the paragon of the true philosopher.

In our opinion, any educational impediments to following in Socrates’ footsteps are inexcusable and morally reprehensible. In fact, we would contest Socrates’ own belief that philosophy—understood as critical reflection on important aspects of how one’s life is being shaped and might be shaped differently—should be an activity reserved for adults. Instead, we believe (along with Mathew Lipman and his world-wide program of Philosophy for Children, cf. Lipman, 1984) that even very young children can profitably engage in this kind of intellectual activity, and there is evidence that most thrive on it. Even if one does not go this far, surely it is true that we now know from developmental psychology that adolescence is a period when most people seem predisposed to this kind of self-referential, deep, critical questioning (Moshman, 2005). We believe that it is a tragedy that so much of what goes on in Canadian high schools not only does not support this kind of inquiry, but, rather, actively stifles it.

The Ontario High School Philosophy Initiative

In the context of this set of beliefs expressed above, we think it most laudable that students in many Ontario high schools are now afforded an opportunity that directly counters this general characterization. There may be other places in the curriculum where something approaching philosophical reflection has been somewhat tolerated, at least occasionally. But now there is sanctioned, explicit attention given to this educational need. Since 1998, Ontario high school students have had the opportunity to take one or both of the courses in philosophy credited by the Ministry of Education for graduation, one course each in Grade 11 and Grade 12. Many, in fact, are availing themselves of this opportunity—as many as 30,000 per year.

Moreover, it is also heartening to see that the courses have been explicitly designed with both Socrates’ injunction and adolescents’ natural inclination for questioning in mind. Working from the official Ministry Guidelines for these courses, writing teams of teachers have developed quite detailed “Course Profiles” for both courses (and for both Catholic and Public schools) that teachers are invited to refer to in their individual approaches to teaching philosophy. All of these Course Profiles, in some fashion, emphasize in their beginning statement of the aims of the course (and develop in often creative ways throughout the document) an explicit rendition of the Socratic injunction. The Grade 12 public profile explicitly utilizes the Socratic injunction in its opening statement:

Students will learn critical-thinking skills, the main ideas expressed by philosophers from a variety of the world’s traditions, how to develop
and explain their own philosophical ideas, and how to apply those ideas to contemporary social issues and personal experiences....In the process of putting into practice the Socratic injunction, “the unexamined life is not worth living;” students develop a range of analytic and synthetic thinking skills, enabling them to tackle the key concepts, issues, and questions of philosophy....Students develop interest in a wide range of important, philosophically-oriented issues and are challenged to think about their world in an engaged, critical manner (Public District School Board Writing Partnership, 2002, p. 1).

In addition, although the profiles for the courses in Ontario’s publicly-funded Catholic schools do not do so, those written for teachers in the public schools explicitly acknowledge that these courses utilize and build upon a natural developmental tendency in adolescence to critically question many aspects of their lives and environment. Thus, the Grade 12 public course profile first notes that, due to the essential openness of the Socratic injunction, the course presents a significant challenge to students because of its contrast to most of how the rest of their educational experience has been epistemologically experienced:

For most students, the study of philosophy is substantially different from anything else they have studied in the past. Often, by the time students reach Grade Twelve, they have come to believe and endorse the notion that their responses to questions are based on the premise that there are readily identifiable right and wrong answers. Rarely have they been encouraged to raise and/or explore questions that have no immediate or cut and dried answers or to pose queries and posit ideas that fundamentally challenge the beliefs and viewpoints of others (Public District School Board Writing Partnership, 2002, p. 2).

However, it then goes on to suggest how this challenge can be lessened by recognition that adolescents are already developing a much more sophisticated epistemology than what most of their schooling supports:

This challenge can be mitigated by the fact that the majority of students, by this stage in their intellectual development, have developed a natural curiosity about the structures and underpinnings of the world around them. They have developed a healthy skepticism towards accepting the status quo in terms of values, beliefs, and ideas. This state leads students towards the desire to delineate and communicate their own set of values and beliefs. The teacher can capitalize on this burgeoning intellectual curiosity by connecting abstract philosophical concepts and questions to the concrete issues and realities relevant to students (Public District School Board Writing Partnership, 2002, p. 2).

In short, most adolescents are already beginning to approach their lives as budding Socratic philosophers, and these courses can be viewed as a natural match with this tendency as a way of sharpening and deepening the kind of critical thinking that is needed to do philosophy well and positively.

As already noted, we think the development of these courses in philosophy, the government’s approval of them for official credit, and the way they are
fleshed out in the profiles to emphasize self-reflexive, Socratic critical thinking are all to be lauded and supported. However, very little is known, except idiosyncratically and anecdotally, about the myriad questions that can be legitimately raised about this bold educational initiative. Such questions would include, but certainly not be limited to, the following:

- Since the possibility of choosing philosophy as a “teachable area” of specialization within pre-service Bachelor of Education programs in the faculties of education of Ontario universities did not exist until September 2008, who is teaching these courses, how is this decided, and what is their background?
- What level and kind of support are teachers receiving?
- How do teachers conceptualize their aims in teaching philosophy?
- What kinds of pedagogies are they utilizing, and does philosophy in any way require them to revise their approach used for other subjects?
- Are there any worrisome biases in the guidelines or the textbooks being used?
- Specifically, what challenges do they experience and how might these challenges be best met?
- As an example of possible challenges, do they experience any tension between the view of philosophy as promoting a disposition of Socratic critical thinking and the application of this approach to controversial issues and/or students’ (and their own) deeply held beliefs?
- How do students respond to the course, both in terms of level of difficulty and as addressing their interests?
- And finally, what might the impact be on students’ thinking that results from their experience with the philosophy courses?

The High School Philosophy Project

For the last 4 years, along with several other graduate students and two undergraduate assistants each year, the authors of this paper have been engaged in research designed to answer some of these questions. In addition, we are also engaged in intensive interviewing of nine teachers currently teaching philosophy as part of a larger, on-going project; this more qualitative approach is designed to elicit in more depth teachers’ views on many of these questions. As the results of this part of the project are proving to be quite rich in terms of the perspectives and issues that different teachers articulate, and we believe that they raise important concerns warranting more public discussion among educators and teacher educators, we will share some of these results. From exhaustive literature reviews, we have determined that next to nothing is known (at least as reported in peer-reviewed academic journals) about this question, with very little more than that with regard to the impact of taking philosophy even at the university level.

In the remainder of this paper, we report some important findings in our interview study to date. As already mentioned, these data are quite rich and all we can do here, and at this point in time, is focus on providing a brief picture of some of what the teachers we have interviewed have to say about one of our central questions. This question, their answers to which we think are necessarily linked in many ways to how they approach more practical questions, concerns how they conceptualize their ideal aims in teaching philosophy to high school.
students. We believe this question goes to the heart of why these courses are so important. But curriculum is always filtered through teachers’ understandings of it and how it fits with their interpretations of the aims of education, writ large, as a worthwhile endeavour. Thus, it is vitally important to know how teachers conceive their aims when they reflect on their teaching of high school philosophy.

**Teachers’ Articulations of Their Aims in Teaching Philosophy**

Our methodology has been designed to capture some of the depth—and implications—of teachers’ thinking about this question, and we believe that our findings are quite suggestive in two ways. First, they suggest a strong congruence between the views expressed in the course profiles and the teachers’ own way of framing their personal aims. And, second, at the same time, they also suggest how, despite this congruence, some teachers may be running up against some impediments in pursuing this aim due to their own epistemological orientations or that of the institution in which they teach. In what follows, we will first discuss the congruence and proceed to illustrate the possible impediments in the teachers’ own words and articulate why we think that the public discussion of the impediments warrant attention, pending more comprehensive research.

First of all, we have found that in answering this question concerning their ideal aims in teaching philosophy, all of the nine teachers, whose interviews we have analyzed, identify the promotion of critical thinking as central to their answers. One of the most articulate expressions of this personal aim is found in the words of “Participant Seven”:

> I hope to have the students develop critical thinking skills, a sort of respect for and practice in intellectual rigor, and to stimulate them to reflect seriously and profoundly on what is considered philosophical subjects rather than sort of shallowly and superficially…. By rigorous I mean able to actually articulate a serious argument in support of or in opposition to an idea that is logical rather than simply being based on…just on their own experience or their own sort of intuition about the correct answer to, in this case philosophical, but really, any question. So, that’s what I mean by rigorous. I guess, able to withstand an objective analysis, as opposed to a sort of degenerating into interpersonal or ad hominem kinds of arguments….

Later in the interview, this participant indicates definite agreement with the statement that “philosophy promotes a disposition to critically explore all kinds of issues, however controversial… [even] when this approach might expose students to views and questions that are contrary to [students’] deeply-held beliefs.” As s/he puts it: “I think that’s exactly what it should be doing, and I like it when it happens.”

In one form or another, all of these teachers express beliefs that are closely congruent with the Socratic injunction discussed above. At first glance, this might not seem a very interesting or surprising finding; after all, they are all teaching a course for which the profiles are framed in this way. However, we think it is indeed important to note for three reasons:
1. These teachers come from multiple disciplines, with an average of fewer than three university courses in philosophy in their backgrounds; thus, there is little reason to assume that they come to teaching philosophy in high school as prior converts to the Socratic way of life.

2. It is certainly possible to think of legitimate alternative answers. For example, given the fact that the discipline has been prominent in Western society for 2500 years and there is thus an incredibly large literature to draw upon—even if one addresses only the main figures in the tradition—it would be possible to conceive the aim of such a course in terms of just getting students acquainted with some of the basic content of the tradition.

3. Since so much of contemporary schooling in our opinion undercuts attention to this aim (at least in practice), and these teachers are part of this system, it shows some considerable courage for them to conceive of their aims in these philosophy courses as so clearly cutting across the grain.

Some Impediments to Achieving Aims

In any subject matter, a common experience that all teachers face is that of impediments to successful achievement of their aims as they conceive them in ideal terms. Many of the contemporary impediments to pursuing the Socratic injunction also function as such, more generally, in the context of teachers’ efforts to achieve their aims, whatever the subject matter—particularly those having to do with time constraints, institutional structures and loyalties, and externally determined criteria for success. However, teaching philosophy at the high school level may have additional and, perhaps, sui generis, impediments to which teachers are vulnerable. On the basis of what teachers have shared with us in our interviews, we believe that there is evidence to warrant this concern. In the spirit of wanting to open up some of these possible areas of concern for further research and discussion among teachers faced with the question of how to handle the impediments, we focus on two such impediments that seem quite salient in the interviews we have conducted.

It is important to keep in mind here that what we are exploring are not impediments to the successful teaching of philosophy however it might be conceived, but to teaching philosophy when the avowed aim is to foster self-reflexive critical thinking in students. The two impediments that we will discuss are (what we will call) “institutional constraints” and “sources of bias,” and we will take them in this order. Our approach is not to discuss them abstractly, but, rather, to illustrate how (some) teachers’ responses to our interview questions reveal, more or less explicitly, the existence of these impediments, and, sometimes, how they seek to surmount them. It should be noted that, for reasons of balance in this paper, we focus on the first impediment in the context of responses of Catholic schoolteachers, and the second, in the context of responses of public school teachers. However, that should not be taken to mean that the impediment of “institutional constraint” does not occur in public schools, nor that the impediment of “sources of bias” does not occur in Catholic schools. It is surely true that both occur in both settings, although likely in different forms. We
are dividing the discussion in this way because the clearest examples in our data are found in the respective contexts.

Examples of “Institutional Constraints”

All teachers in schools work within institutions that, in some form or other, place constraints on how they can teach. Teachers in Catholic schools, however, may face additional constraints that emanate more from the school’s necessary affiliation with the Catholic Church than from aspects of the school that might apply independently of this affiliation (McDonough, 2008; McDonough, 2007, see esp. p. 2). Catholic schools in Ontario are required to provide academic and social experiences that encourage secular citizenship, including especially the fostering of student autonomy and critical thinking, but secular scholarship and the values of Canada’s liberal society sometimes clash with Catholic values and beliefs. For example, the prevailing Catholic teachings on sexuality, gender equity, and reproduction are in conflict with Canadian law. While the majority of Canadian Catholics disagree with these teachings (Bibby, 1993), Catholic school students may experience little or no institutional support for expressing disagreement in a way that does not force them into a binary choice between Catholicism and secular justice. It is in this context that a course in philosophy that emphasizes self-reflexive critical thinking as its main aim must be seen as embedded. Moreover, to the degree that a high school philosophy teacher interprets his/her role as teacher in terms of an exclusive brand of doctrinal loyalty to the Catholic Church, that teacher is likely to experience very real constraints on the promotion of critical thinking about some topics.

Our “Participant Four” represents a good example of how these constraints are played out in the context of his/her philosophy teaching. The following is this teacher’s response to the question, “Have you ever felt like anything you were teaching was in tension with the Catholic identity of the school or with Catholic teaching?” To this question, the teacher replied:

Probably. I guess the arguments for the existence of God that we look at when we do the metaphysics unit, you know, definitely had Catholic overtones and, you know, overtones of, you know, well if you are sitting here right now and you’re an atheist, I’m going to try to convince you why, that, you know, God exists kind of thing. So, probably—I guess centrally—in that. And then, you know, [in] the unit on ethics I try to incorporate, you know, as many Catholic teachings as possible [too].

Then the interviewer focuses the question even more by asking “How would you approach the actual more secular teachings in ethics and morality?” To this, the following reply:

Well, I guess, you know, just present both sides of the issue. Say “people would believe this, but, you know, as a Catholic, Catholics, we don’t believe that necessarily….We believe this way is the right way…..”
Finally, when asked to give an example of the kind of topic on which "students ever start to question some of the institutional practices of the Catholic Church based on some of the discussion and topics in this class," this teacher offers the Church’s positions on birth control and abstinence. In this context, how his/her role as a philosophy teacher is conceived is very clear:

So, it’s okay to question things. But at the same time, you know, I kind of see my role as sort of defender of the Church….Like good old Pope Benedict.

It does not seem to us from what this teacher says here and elsewhere in the interview that he/she experiences these limits placed on students’ application of self-reflexive critical thinking as problematic, but, rather, just a “given” of teaching philosophy in a Catholic school. We do suspect, however, that at least some of those students (particularly those without Catholic commitments, and probably some of those with them) perceive them as artificial, restraining, and perhaps even hypocritical to some extent. Of course, this also depends on how the teacher interprets, presents, and communicates his/her role as “defender of the Church,” and then, too, how forceful and effective he/she is in this role.

“Participant Six,” also a teacher in a Catholic school, appears to be aware of the same kind of institutional constraints that might be seen as coming from the Church, but also appears to see these constraints more explicitly as somewhat in tension with his/her conception of teaching philosophy as aiming at critical thinking. As in the case of every interview, the following question is asked: “Some people say that a philosophy course, or philosophy in general, promotes a disposition to critically explore all kinds of issues, however controversial they are. Would you agree with that?” The answer given is quite clearly in the affirmative: “Yes, I would. I think they should.” However, it is also clear that this teacher grapples with the fact that there nevertheless seem to be some boundaries to this exploration in terms of topics, and with the questions of where these boundaries come from and how to handle them.

I’m working in a Catholic school so some issues don’t come up, obviously….I don’t know if it’s a Catholic school [issue] or just high school—particular. [But] there’s certain boundaries and I’m not always aware of them. But there are probably places you could go in discussion that…you don’t always go, because you’re not sure about it. And I don’t think it’s places they want to go and then you stop them. It’s places that if I were to think about it, it would be somewhere we could go, but don’t. But I think that’s what philosophy should be, …and a lot of stuff comes up.

On some kinds of issues that might appear controversial in this institutional setting, this teacher does not flinch from approaching them in the Socratic spirit:

In particular, with religion…I have no problem with them challenging a lot of that stuff. I think they should….As long as every issue is approached in terms of the intellectual…the thinking of it, let’s do it. Like, no problem….I really do encourage them; there’s no limitation here.
At the same time, some topics seem much more problematic for some reason—for example, sex:

When you’re in a school...you’re not going to talk about sex. You’re just not....There’s pieces that kind of get shelved. And I don’t know what exactly we do about that, but...it’s just there.

Another example brought up is abortion. On this the teacher seems to say that, if it comes up, no hard line will be taken on the “correct” position, but it is certainly better to try to avoid it:

Even with the abortion issue, if someone is pro-choice, I don’t feel compelled to prove them wrong. That’s the wrong approach from a philosophy standpoint....I know I teach in a Catholic school, but that’s why we didn’t belabour abortion. I didn’t want to get into that because I know it’s a hot topic.

This teacher acknowledges that other colleagues in this school also teaching the philosophy course take a harder, doctrinally adhering line, teaching it much more as a religion course. And the existence of this alternative, in this institutional setting, presents a tension that he/she is not sure how to deal with:

One man in particular, I know he does it with more of a religious slant than I do....I didn’t build it that way, and it came out a lot. Because a lot of those topics were there. But I don’t feel like I had the best handle on that, on how to do that. There were full units that dealt with issues of religion, but I felt like because...I was doing the philosophy focus, it was feeling like I’m not quite certain how to make these two match, and how to do that. So that’s more my fault, I think—if it can be done. I just don’t think I did it properly.

In some contrast to “Participant Four,” who sees clear boundaries to the aim of promoting self-reflexive critical thinking emanating from his/her accepted role of “defender of the Church,” this second teacher seems to want to avoid this institutional constraint as much as possible. But, in the end, the tension produced seems to be taken on as a personal failure as a philosophy teacher in this setting, although somewhat ambivalently because removing it entirely may not be possible.

Examples of “Sources of Bias”

As we have noted above, a second kind of impediment that could limit how well philosophy is taught with the aim of promoting self-reflexive critical thinking might be called “sources of bias.” Here, the problem is not located so much in the institution within which one is teaching, but, at least potentially, more in the curriculum, the teachers’ selective use of the curriculum, or the teachers’ degree of awareness of his/her social location and its bearing on the question. In the interviews with the teachers in this study, we find examples of each of these three kinds of perspectives on bias.
All participants were asked the straightforward question, “Are there any problems with bias in the documents?”, meaning the Guidelines and Course Profiles. “Participant Nine” interprets the question in terms of the “Western” emphasis in the curriculum and his/her own educational history in line with this emphasis:

Well, it is certainly Western, although we work at bringing in other perspectives more. I find that easier to do as I become more comfortable with World Religions, because that cyclical view of history gives you a very different perspective—human-Buddhist, around self and visions of reality. We’ll talk about Taoism and Kong Fu Tse and that kind of thing. So we’re bringing more and more alternative Eastern perspectives that are mentioned in the documents, but not perhaps well developed. That is also not my history of study; so that’s an area I need to work on more. I took Western philosophy: I took Descartes and Plato and Hume and all those guys. So that is something I think can be developed more with time.

This teacher is clearly aware of the possibility that an overly “Western” emphasis in the curriculum might unduly shape the kinds of world views within which critical questions might be raised—or even, perhaps, the interpretation of critical thinking itself. He/she is also concerned about the possible bias that might come from his/her greater comfort level with this tradition and accepts the need to working on balancing this through more self education.

“Participant Eight” addresses the source of bias that might constitute an impediment less holistically in terms of the design of the curriculum and more in terms of how it might get used by a particular teacher, including himself/herself. In the context of his/her earlier claim that, in terms of content, “the main goal for me is in giving students an overview of the history of ideas they can see, to some extent chronologically—understanding the main contributions of major thinkers,” this teacher first interprets the source of potential bias in the teacher’s preference of one philosopher over another. In answer to the question, “Do you find any biases or anything in the curriculum?”, he/she responds:

No, like most textbooks I would say that it tries so hard to avoid bias that it can be very pasty and sort of neutral….My preferred method is to be really clear to students about where are my biases, but to make it clear that this is just my bias, this is why I like Aristotle more than Plato, but here’s what’s great about Plato, and then attack it, tackle it.

However, a further response adds a deeper dimension to this answer in that this teacher’s preference for a particular approach to philosophy is not limited to arguing for one mainstream influential figure over another, but also extends more problematically to a rejection of philosophical approaches that represent alternatives to this core, Western mainstream. Thus, he/she goes on to acknowledge the following broad perspective underlying his/her approach to the curriculum:
There’s intent in the documents to pay equal attention to the post-modern movements, and feminist movements, and movements for Asia. And my degree’s in ancient Philosophy and religion. But [so] there’s no time for it, I don’t do it: I don’t do modern feminist stuff; I don’t do the post-modern stuff. Partly because there’s so much political correctness involved in wanting to put it on the curriculum to feel they have to please everybody. But I just don’t think that that’s what kids need.

The observation that we would make about this response, one that the teacher does not seem to recognize, is that this orientation to more contemporary approaches to philosophy is not just a personal “preference,” but, rather, arguably in considerable tension with his/her firmly held belief that what makes philosophy unique is the fact that it promotes “thinking about thinking”:

My sense is that the thinking process is included in every course, but this is the only course when they actually have to think about thinking. So, meta-thinking is an actual subject component here.

If “modern feminist stuff” and “post-modern stuff” (and perhaps also “Asian” philosophy) are understood, as we think they should be, as systemically developed forms of meta-thinking about the cannon and philosophical methods within mainstream, mostly masculine Western philosophy, the rejection of these as legitimate amounts to a significant impediment to this teacher’s own expressed aim in teaching philosophy, one internal to his/her own thinking.

In contrast to Participants “Nine” and “Eight,” “Participant Seven” seems, to us, more self-reflexively aware of how an impediment to achieving his/her aim of promoting critical thinking, broadly and Socratically construed, might be a result of his/her social location and how that might affect his/her use of the curriculum. As noted in the section above on how teachers identify their aims in teaching philosophy, we found this participant particularly articulate in locating this aim in the direction of promoting critical thinking. To us it is significant that the understanding of this aim is not limited to a consideration of students but is also extended Socratically to the teachers’ own critical thinking in reference to his/her relation to the curriculum.

In answer to the standard question “Are there any problems with bias in the philosophy curriculum?” this teacher replies as follows:

I don’t, well, problems, no. I think that the curriculum itself is sufficiently general that one can overcome biases….If you look at the curriculum, the expectations per se I think are general enough that there’s no obvious problems with bias. The examples that support the expectations I think you can point in a curricular direction. I’ll be candid and say I’m a white, middle class North American from the second half of the twentieth century—so I already have particular biases. And I think that one of the reasons that I don’t see a particular problem with biases in the curriculum is that it may be that I come from the same ideological universe as the curriculum itself does, so I don’t perceive these problems. You could say it’s a problem, perhaps, that the curriculum does allow me to maintain a pretty, sort of, traditional Western Euro-centric vision of philosophy without any problem. I
mean,…it doesn’t prevent me from addressing Eastern philosophy, African philosophy, all of that, but it doesn’t by the same token require me to do that either. From my smug perspective I guess I would say that’s a good thing because, you know, it allows me to stay within my own ideological comfort zone, but I guess you could argue that that’s a problem with bias in the curriculum. Not that it forces you in one direction, but that it fails to force you in other directions.

From our point of view, the orientation to possible sources of bias found in this teacher’s reflections here does represent a potential impediment to a full achievement of his/her aims. However, through the self-reflexive recognition of the source of the impediment as grounded in his/her social location and its implication for how “comfortable” the curriculum seems, it is itself more amenable to overcoming through Socratic critical thinking, especially if shared with the students.

**Conclusion**

Offering philosophy as a course of study to high school students is a welcome initiative because, generally speaking, it directly engages with the pedagogical aims of promoting critical thinking and of matching curricular experiences to students’ own lived interests and natural questions. Philosophy not only trains critical thinking in its own discipline, but its style of answering questions and questioning answers also strongly informs critical thinking across the entire curriculum. But in addition to this cross-curricular attribute, philosophy also cuts across the prevalent trend of content-driven pedagogical practice because it directly aims to develop “thinking-about-thinking,” which includes the view of meta-perspectives on the dominant rationales for the purpose and worthiness of education itself. Critical thinking as such cannot find a more realistic domain for theory and practice. One might or might not agree with the Socratic-attributed injunction that the unexamined life is not worth living, but certainly the habits, techniques, and content of the study of philosophy and a philosophical approach to life make for interesting, sensible, and good pedagogy, assuming a competent teacher.

Socrates may have died because of his unwavering commitment to living a critically examined life, but his spirit certainly still lives—and for the last several years significantly so in Ontario high schools. In this sense it is definitely not hyperbolic rumor to claim “Socrates seen in Ontario high schools,” but fact. As we have reported in this paper, evidence supporting this claim includes the high numbers of students now taking one of the two credited courses in philosophy, the way the courses are conceived in the “Profiles” guiding teachers, and in (at least some) teachers’ articulated aims in their teaching efforts. To repeat, we see this as a very positive development in Ontario education.

However, as we have also noted at the beginning of this paper, pursuit of the examined life in contemporary North American society faces truly daunting impediments. This orientation to life unfortunately risks being terminated by numerous countervailing forces, just as Socrates’ real life was many centuries ago. We certainly find it encouraging to discover teachers in our (admittedly small) sample explicitly and actively interpreting their aims in teaching
philosophy in Socratic terms, as it is only through their intentional teaching efforts that the spirit will continue to live, especially in an arguably hostile environment. In this paper we have chosen to focus on the importance of exploring impediments faced by such teachers as a way of underscoring the importance of their role and efforts, and to encourage those in teacher education to take them seriously in designing courses in the new “teachable subject area” of philosophy in Ontario faculties of education. Although there are certainly other impediments to consider significant, we also believe that our data reveal important epistemological impediments to maximally successful promotion of Socratic critical thinking through philosophy that teachers face, both in what we have called “institutional constraints” and “sources of bias.” In the end, however, we see differences in how these teachers recognize and seek to deal with these impediments as evidence of room for Socratic in-service and pre-service teacher education, and thus for our optimistic conclusion that Socrates “has not left the building”—and is not likely to in the near future.

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