

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION OR LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PHILOSOPHY



RÉAL ROY
Retired philosophy professor
Cégep Limoilou

Knowing how to live together humanely in society is certainly a worthwhile cause. It is also a real challenge for those who wish to educate the youth of today. This article outlines how philosophy can be considered a privileged discipline for supporting the development of responsible citizenship among college students.

► LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER AS HUMAN BEINGS

Even at school, citizenship education does not rest on the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Rather, it targets the development of civic behaviour in all inhabitants of a given territory (one they identify with) and ultimately throughout the entire world. Knowing how to live together is fundamental to living within a family, being a good neighbour and developing friendships. Add to this the desire to be involved in the community and contribute to the wellbeing of its people, even if this simply means voting in municipal, provincial, and federal elections; learning through commitment that our words can have an influence in making things better, in the spirit of convergence with the greatest number and in a perspective of common good.

► THE VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION OF PHILOSOPHY COURSES TO CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The contribution of philosophy courses to the development of the student's identity as a citizen is reflected in the purpose of the courses: To learn to build democracy together through discussion;

to explore the human potential; to work with fellow citizens to identify common values and institutions that will protect these values and make them active — a solid basis for a program!

We can understand even better how philosophy courses support the development of the college student's identity as a citizen if we look at the topics of discussion in philosophy courses provided in general education. The first course in philosophy at collegial level explores ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy. A democracy that rests on the power of the word, and where valid arguments become the rulers by which validity is gauged. The second course in philosophy asks a fundamental question: What does it mean to be a human being today? Who are the heirs — man, woman and child — in this project of creation we call humanity? The third course in philosophy elicits identification with values and institutions that support societal living. It is this identification alone that can propel human potential into becoming human success stories.

To fuel student reflections and allow them to cultivate their own citizenship identity, philosophy acts as a compass to help them position themselves within the whole of humanity. It is up to them to decide what kind of human being they want to be today, in their own immediate environment. From this standpoint, students can establish with others a meaningful, fulfilling, and humane relationship. The option offered to all of us on the planet is spelled out in the *Universal declaration of human rights*.

[...] philosophy can be considered a privileged discipline for supporting the development of responsible citizenship among college students.

Added to this cultural background is the fact that the philosophy class can use the very models it is exploring in terms of ideas and values, i.e., creating a forum for instance, where students can pursue their reflections and discussions with colleagues, as social players (which they are) and not as mere spectators to discussions about cultural realities of which they know little or nothing. Such activities are a good measure of the contribution that philosophy courses bring to the development of citizenship awareness among students.

► PROJECTS TO BUILD THE FUTURE

Concurrently with general philosophy courses, philosophy teachers have been involved for the past few years in projects that complement citizenship education for students. For example, *Grandes Rencontres* and *Science & Société* are projects that teach students to move with the times and stay abreast of the fundamental knowledge of the day in order to understand what is at stake and participate in key social debates. The project *Commission de l'éthique de la science et de la technologie* is designed so students formulate and submit an opinion to the Québec government



on a major issue in education today: Electronic plagiarism. The inter collegial French public speaking contest *Concours oratoire intercollégial* brings students to open their minds and their hearts to the basic necessities of “living together”, which mobilize the solidarity of all those wanting to build a humane and liveable world, i.e. a beautiful and good place for their children. Some of these projects are described below.

TO MOVE WITH THE TIMES AND STAY ABREAST OF THE FUNDAMENTAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE DAY

Concurrently with general philosophy courses, the project *Grandes Rencontres*¹ organizes conferences for students as well as the general public. Initiated by several professors from the department of philosophy at Cégep de Limoilou, this project is designed as an educational supplement featuring the reflections of reputed scientists and well-known philosophers who propose basic ideas for cultural growth, while focusing on today’s most pressing problems. Among these: Albert Jacquard, Charles Taylor, Riccardo Pétrella, Michel Serres, Edgar Morin, Luc Ferry, Guy Rocher, Georges Leroux, Thomas de Koninck, François Pothier, Dominique Michaud and Laurent Drissen, to name a few. All conferences are videotaped for future use by colleges, universities, and libraries. Since 1997, *Grandes rencontres* has dealt with a range of topics concerning life in society, health, genetically modified organisms, climatic changes, the brain, and communication.

The teaching objective of *Grandes rencontres* is to create an openness of mind and spirit in students for a very broad range of knowledge. This will help them position themselves within the vastness of current scientific knowledge and technological development that is shaping our modern society — scientific knowledge and development that could have major consequences on the fundamental way we see humans and society!

The beauty of general education is that it reaches students from all study programs, pre-university levels, Humanities or Natural sciences, Physical techniques and Techniques humaines, etc. It did not seem right that students of Humanities should exclude Natural sciences from their lives; or that students of Natural sciences should remove humanities from their fields of interest; or that those enrolled in technical programs close their minds to information that would be useful to them later on. We challenged all these students to broaden their horizons and gave them ways of acquiring knowledge of things that shape society. We hoped to interest them as citizens so they would be curious about the state of current knowledge, regardless of their discipline. We wanted to prepare them to follow the evolution of this knowledge; to be an active citizen today and to speak knowingly on questions dealing with quality of life on earth and within society.

The *Forum international Science & Société*² is another example of a worthwhile annual project. It was launched in 2000. Over 250 students representing all colleges take part in a weekend of reflection and debate with well-known researchers (Francophone

researchers and researchers from various Québec universities). The goal of the project derives from its name: To debate from a citizenship perspective what is at stake socially and ethically in light of ongoing scientific and technological advances, which is the leitmotif of the work of Edgar Morin, founder of *Science & Citoyen* in France. The interdisciplinary character of all problems, the overlapping of humanities with natural sciences, and the necessary dialogue between scientific and citizenship points of view are key components in all workshops offered to our youth.

The interdisciplinary character of all problems, the overlapping of humanities with natural sciences, and the necessary dialogue between scientific and citizenship points of view are key components in all workshops offered to our youth.

This year for example, the topic *La science à l’ère planétaire* presented debates on media, nanotechnology, space exploration, climatic changes, health and food.

Students interested in health issues will discuss issues with medical doctor Marquis Fortin; researcher Pablo Gluschkof, Faculty of Medicine, and Michèle S. Jean, president of UNESCO’s Bioethics Commission. This year, participating students came from 30 cégeps throughout the province and a variety of disciplines. Thanks to the support of the Comité provincial des enseignants de philosophie (Provincial committee of philosophy teachers), philosophy professors can play a key role in promoting this event among students. In fact, many attend the events with their students.

The *Forum international Science & Société* offers an intense experience in general

¹ To access the catalogue of videoconferences of *Grandes Rencontres* at Cégep Limoilou: [www.climoilou.qc.ca].

² To access the site *Science & Société*: [www.acfas.ca].



culture, knowledge of our times, and how to become an enlightened citizen of the 21st century. A citizen who uses valid arguments, because he has taken the time to understand the meaning behind things and who participates knowingly in public discussions on important social issues.

LEARNING HOW TO SHARE IN THE GOVERNANCE OF SOCIETY

The mandate of the *Commission de l'éthique de la science et de la technologie* (CEST) is to write an opinion on key issues in the development of science and technology, the quality of life within society or the unconditional respect of human dignity and submit it to the Québec government. For example: *Pour une gestion éthique des OGM* (The ethical management of genetically modified organisms) and *Les enjeux éthiques des banques d'information génétique: pour un encadrement démocratique et responsable* (The ethical stakes in genetic information databanks: A democratic and responsible framework). The *raison d'être* of the Commission is to inform, reflect and make proposals, which is the essence of a committed citizenship. In 2005, the CEST launched the project *Commission jeunesse*, (Youth Commission) in cooperation with philosophy teachers from five colleges of various Québec regions. The project studied a crucial issue in education today: *Le plagiat électronique dans les travaux scolaires. Une pratique qui soulève des questions éthiques.* (Electronic plagiarism in academic work. A practice that raises ethical questions.)

This project was developed initially in colleges within the ethics course. Students worked on current problems in light of various theories studied in the course. They elected three students to represent them with the *Commission Jeunesse* at Duchesnay on April 16 and 17, 2005.

The group consisted of 15 participants accompanied by their teachers. Similar to *Parlement jeunesse*, (Youth parliament), they elected a president and proceeded to finalize their opinion. They posted it officially on November 12 at the *Forum international Science & Société*. The project made it possible to involve the democratic participation of a large number of student citizens who committed themselves to improving fairness in the evaluation of academic work to ensure an equitable treatment for all. This project is a powerful example of social commitment, the basis for learning to live together in honesty and with respect for the dignity of all.

[...] the student reflects on problems identified by the competition and prepares his arguments based on logic and the acknowledgement of others, as brothers.

The *Concours oratoire intercollégial* was inaugurated a few weeks ago. All students of ethics were invited to speak out on *Pour les droits humains et le développement durable*³ (For human rights and long-term development). Using the training he receives in his course, the student reflects on problems identified by the competition and prepares his arguments based on logic and the acknowledgement of others, as brothers. Problems are international and exist beyond our times. To speak out is to show commitment to our environment and to our colleagues, to begin to work towards peace, cooperation, the development of human activities, and for those who seek a good and healthy life for our generation and the ones to follow.

Learning to move with the times, understanding the fundamental knowledge of our day, learning how to share in the governance of our society, and showing solidarity: These are the components of learning how to live together as humans as well as the broad guidelines in citizenship education.

CONCLUSION

The basis of any reflection whether personal or social, rests on an enlightened and critical intellect. Given its innate nature, philosophy is an essential component of citizenship education. It motives the future adult to shape his thought processes, to favour opportunities that refine his critical judgment and allow him to look upon the society of which he is a full member with a clear and constructive eye. He will then be ready to play his role as a citizen and to contribute to the ongoing growth and wellbeing of his community. ◀

Réal ROY has been a Philosophy professor for 36 years at Cégep Limoilou. Holder of a Ph.D. in Education from Université Laval, he has deepened the concept of general education in cégeps: An intention to educate, a principle to act. Member of the CEEP (Comité des enseignants et enseignantes de philosophie), he currently is coordinator for the *Grandes Rencontres* at Cégep Limoilou.
re.roy@sympatico.ca

³ To access the site of Concours: [<http://jeunesse.dev.org/frames.html>].