

May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

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# High school philosophy teachers' use of textbooks: Critical thinking or teaching to the text?

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the few contexts in which high school students are introduced to argumentation is in philosophy courses. Do such teachers promote critical thinking and argumentation? We present the findings of a mixed-methods empirical study of Ontario high school philosophy teachers, providing insight into the degree to which teachers promote oppositional readings of texts in a manner consistent with critical thinking. We identify the factors that contribute to critical thinking, as well as the barriers, focusing textbooks use.

**KEYWORDS:** critical thinking; textbook use; high school philosophy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ontario is the only North American jurisdiction to include philosophy as part of its secondary school curriculum. Since no empirical investigation of the content and structure of Ontario high school philosophy courses has yet been conducted, we engaged in research to investigate high school philosophy teachers' practices. As a discipline, philosophy is thought to be unique in its emphasis on critical thinking (see, Ministry of Education 2000, Ayim 1980) and argumentation, so our focus in this paper is to explore whether widespread use of textbooks supports or mitigates those aims. Moreover, despite widespread use of textbooks in schools across subject disciplines, little empirical investigation on how they are used. Our research provides insight into these gaps by providing a descriptive account of Ontario high school philosophy teachers' textbook practices as they relate to critical thinking and argumentation.

Ontario's two philosophy courses (Philosophy: Questions and Theories in grade 12, and Philosophy: The Big Questions in grade 11) are guided by Ministry of Education policy documents which define learner outcomes. If it is the case that "Philosophy trains students in critical and logical thinking" (Ministry of Education 2000), we would expect that a high school philosophy teacher would encourage students to engage in critical inquiry when interacting with textbooks, contributing to the cultivation of habits of mind

consistent with philosophical thought and practice.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we present findings specifically related to high school philosophy teachers' textbook use.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to situate our understanding of how high school philosophy teachers use textbooks, we apply Apple and Christian-Smith's (1991) framework to describe the nature of the interaction between the reader and the text. This framework identifies three ways that readers interact with texts: *dominated*; *negotiated*; and *oppositional*. Though these three approaches are applicable to any text, here we consider them specifically as they relate to textbooks. Applying this framework to our analysis offers a means to situate teachers' approaches to textbook use within a continuum, and thus adds richness to our analysis of data on the pedagogical methods (not course content) teachers employ.

In the *dominated* approach, the reader accepts the message at face value. In a classroom, this involves positioning information in the text as "fact" and not seeking alternate perspectives nor questioning its content or its underlying assumptions within the selective tradition that guides the textbook. This reduces students' readings of texts to knowledge acquisition and comprehension. In the *negotiated* approach, the reader may dispute portions of the text, but accepts the overall interpretations presented as valid or true, with the focus remaining on knowledge and comprehension rather than thinking and inquiry. Finally, in the *oppositional* approach, the reader repositions herself in relation to the text, and challenges its content, interpretation or the perspective(s) it employs or presupposes. Within this framework, we suggest that the oppositional approach is the most ideal because it is congruent with a disciplined philosophical habit and the cultivation of critical thinking and argumentation.<sup>2</sup> An oppositional reading of a textbook is characterized by several features, in philosophy or any other classrooms. First, oppositional readers view a textbook as a whole, identifying whose or which perspectives are included and excluded. Second, readers unpack underlying assumptions implicit in the textbook. Third, readers investigate if competing conceptions of textbook topics exist, what those competing conceptions are. Readers assess both sets of conceptions for their applicability, validity, and bias, and make informed decisions about which positions they agree/disagree with—thereby applying criteria to their analysis and inquiring into their rational status.

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<sup>1</sup> However, Blair's (2009) analysis of the Ministry of Education's (2000) philosophy curriculum policy concludes that the courses "certainly aim to convey some of the elements of critical thinking abilities, but they are too narrow" to fully ensure critical thinking and argumentation are taught if teachers are to follow the curriculum policy (Blair 2009: 277).

<sup>2</sup> Many have eloquently and thoroughly addressed justifications for critical thinking as an educational ideal (e.g., Siegel 1988, Fisher & Scriven 1997; Hare 1998). Hare (1998) summarizes three justifications for critical thinking as a central aim of education. The ethical justification demands that the student be "treated with the respect due to someone capable of growing into an autonomous adult with a distinctive point of view" (Hare 1998: 47). The pragmatic justification requires that critical thinking be central in order to prepare students for other capacities (e.g., further education). Finally, the intellectual justification requires that teachers "wean students away from the mere acceptance of beliefs which others tell them are true, and encourage them to try and assess the credentials of those who present themselves as experts" (Hare, 1998: 48). By engaging in an oppositional reading of an official textbook, students apply and cultivate critical thinking skills and dispositions through questioning and analyzing. Thus, an oppositional approach to textbooks would engage in the sort of inquiry consistent with critical thinking ideals.

These features of oppositional reading, thus, are consistent with cultivation of argumentation among students.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW: PRACTICE IN PHILOSOPHY CLASSROOMS

Rather astoundingly, and despite numerous, and often strong, claims about the benefits of studying philosophy, very little empirical study has been conducted to describe pedagogies in philosophy courses. An extensive literature review reveals that philosophy at the high school level has not been researched or reported.<sup>4</sup>

Insight into teachers' use of textbooks is of utmost importance because, in a classroom context, both teachers and students are readers of texts, though research in this area is scant at best, with the exception of a few studies about the frequency of their use (Dove 1998; Schug et. al. 1997; Moulton 1994; Zahorik 1991 who report that between 60% and 95% of classroom instruction and activity is textbook-driven). More importantly, teachers play a role in guiding students' reading of texts. In doing so, teachers have the opportunity to engage students in the sorts of critical inquiry consistent with philosophical practice through oppositional approaches to textbook reading, particularly since textbooks are open to multiple interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> By contrast, an absence of such oppositional pedagogical approaches runs a risk of simply reproducing content delivery to knowledge and comprehension (rather than thinking/inquiry), and failing to consider or displaying an ignorance of pedagogies suited to critical thinking. In our view, this oppositional approach is congruent with learning to think and not limited to memorizing how others think: an approach which is analogous to the difference between getting students to memorize historical events and narratives on the one hand, and getting them to think historically (i.e., interpreting and evaluating accounts and sources) on the other.

<sup>4</sup> By contrast, at the university level we might expect to find studies about philosophy in the curriculum, since it has historically played such a central role in the conception of liberal arts programs (Altman 2004). However, only two studies have examined philosophical education—one published 28 years ago (Annis & Annis 1979) and the other only in the very limited sense of training in symbolic logic (Leighton 2006). The reason for this may be that Ontario is the only major Anglophone political jurisdiction to offer philosophy courses for credit at the high school level. Given the very common belief that philosophy is an area of study best reserved for adults, promoted historically most strongly by Plato himself (in the Republic), it is somewhat ironic that, in comparison to the lack of attention received at the high school and university levels, at the primary level there is considerable research on teaching philosophy to young children. This seems due almost exclusively to the worldwide "Philosophy for Children" movement started and actively promoted by Matthew Lipman and colleagues since the early 1970s (García-Moriyón, Rebollo & Colom 2005). In addition to this research which confirms the ability of students to engage in philosophical inquiry, developmental psychologists see intellectual growth in adolescence in terms of qualitative changes in the direction of "advanced forms and levels of thinking, reasoning and rationality" (Moshman 2005: 1). In fact, three prominent psychologists (Moshman 2005; Stanovich 2001; Sternberg 2001) explicitly link their domain of study to mainstream philosophical conceptions. This evidence suggests that adolescent students are indeed capable of oppositional reading as a component of higher-order cognition, albeit with the guidance and encouragement of their teachers.

<sup>5</sup> Our concern in this research is with the pedagogical methods used to read textbooks—not with textbook content itself. This is because: We cannot assume that what is "in" the text is actually taught. Nor can we assume that what is taught is actually learned. Teachers have a long history of mediating and transforming text material when they employ it in classrooms. Students bring their own classed, raced, and gendered biographies with them as well. They, too, accept, reinterpret, and reject what counts as legitimate knowledge selectively. (Apple & Bascom 1992: 10)

If we accept critical thinking and argumentation as valuable and valid educational aims, and central to philosophical practice, then a failure to implement an oppositional approach towards texts and textbooks defeat them, transforming teaching into a kind of indoctrination in which students simply accept information presented to them as truth, without critically appraising or questioning its validity. That is to say, when educational outcomes involve closed-mindedness, then the process of teaching (through action or inaction) amounts to indoctrination (Lammi 1997).<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. METHODS OF INQUIRY

The data presented here are part of a broader study into the methods, materials and pedagogies of Ontario high school philosophy teachers. Since no empirical investigation of the content and structure of Ontario high school philosophy courses exists to date, we sought to find out how these teachers structure courses and engage students. We utilized a mixed-method approach combining an online survey in the first phase, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews in the second. Our interviews sought greater detail about teachers' practices and perspectives. The interview protocol draws upon Apple & Christian-Smith's (1991) framework for questions about textbook use.

##### *4.1 Context, Participants and Analysis*

Fifty-three high school philosophy teachers responded to the online survey. While the actual number of philosophy teachers in Ontario is unknown, courses in 300 schools suggest a population of 300 or more teachers, each with one or more sections of philosophy per year. We estimate that respondents represent between 14% and 18% of the population. We also interviewed fourteen high school philosophy teachers.

We analyzed survey data using SPSS to generate frequencies and cross-tabulations, as well as chi-square tests and Kruskal-Wallis analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and factor analysis. We transcribed all interview data collected. First, all members

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<sup>6</sup> The dominated approach may be considered indoctrinative because it takes information contained in texts at face value. Without critical inquiry into the validity of claims, values, and information, this results in blind acceptance of content. Similarly, the negotiated approach, which represents the middle-ground of interaction with texts, also lends itself to indoctrination, because portions of the text are taken at face value and not questioned or approached critically. If students simply accept information and concepts without "actively inquiring into their rational status" (Siegel 1988:89)—a necessary but not sufficient condition for indoctrination—as they will if they take a dominated or possibly negotiated approach to the text, they are reading without considering whether that content is accurate or not. This is problematic for two reasons. First, readers may be misinformed about issues which are misrepresented or not fully explored in texts. Though misinformation by itself does not equal indoctrination, inducing students to accept such information uncritically does at least border on indoctrination. Second, and most importantly, sustained interaction with textbooks in this fashion will likely lead students to carry on dominated and negotiated approaches beyond their schooling, resulting in, at worst closed-minded graduates, and, at best, misinformed individuals (Lammi 1997).

Thus, even if a textbook makes every effort to be inclusive and complete, and even if we assume it to be a fine textbook, it still remains that the textbook ought to be scrutinized using the oppositional approach to reading. As such, our concern is with the pedagogical methods teachers coordinate with their use of textbooks—not with textbook content itself. An oppositional analysis of texts encourages the critical spirit (Siegel 1997) and cultivates important critical thinking skills and dispositions.

of the research team participated in inductive analysis of transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen 1998 and Tesch 1990). A second phase of analysis specifically for this paper relied on a deductive approach to analyzing interview data.

## 5. FINDINGS

### *5.1 Frequency of Textbook Use*

Our data reveals that high school philosophy teachers tend to use textbooks (92%), and that they rely on secondary sources as opposed to primary philosophy texts. Approximately two-thirds of respondents use textbooks weekly or more frequently. Seventy-seven report that they use their own sequence in their courses, and select portions of the textbook to read. Thirty-nine percent report that they reviewed and selected the textbooks used themselves, while 35% use what was already available in the school. All but one interview participant (Alan) use one or more textbooks in their philosophy courses.

### *5.2 Approach to Textbook Use*

We relied on both survey and interview data to establish the approaches to textbook use within our conceptual framework, described earlier. As a whole, survey and interview data suggest predominantly dominated and negotiated approaches to textbook use.

To describe teachers' use of textbooks, we first examined the extent to which teachers provide students with points-of-view that contradict those in the textbook used. The survey data offer a rough but important initial indication about how frequently teachers "consciously incorporate materials that conflict with, contradict, or present an alternative point-of-view to the text." An oppositional approach would encourage students to question content, which could be achieved by presenting contradictory readings. Survey responses suggest that 23% of respondents do so daily or almost every class, suggesting a consistently oppositional approach. Half of respondents do this weekly or less frequently (suggesting a negotiated approach), while 11% never engage in this practice (suggesting a dominated approach). Thus, even a preliminary item concerning content can attest to a claim that the more frequently conflicting or contradictory materials are provided, the more oppositional the approach can be inferred.

Next, we found that approximately three-quarters of teachers surveyed relied on dominated and negotiated approaches based on the frequency with which they ask students to identify perspectives included and excluded from textbooks, and how often they "discuss the inclusion/exclusion of diverse perspectives in textbook readings." The more they ask students to identify included and excluded perspectives, and discuss issues around diverse perspectives, the more we infer an oppositional approach. Twenty-eight percent ask students to identify perspectives included and excluded from texts daily or every class, 38% do this weekly or less frequently, and 19% do not do this at all. Similarly, 27% report that they "discuss the inclusion/exclusion of diverse perspectives in textbook readings" daily or almost every class, 45% do this weekly or less frequently, and 15% do not do this at all. Together, these responses suggest that approximately one-quarter interact with the textbook in oppositional ways on a regular basis.

Interviews confirmed the predominance of dominated and negotiated use of textbooks revealed in survey responses while offering greater insight into individuals' practices. Among all interviews, only two passages from two different teachers seemed to reflect an oppositional use of textbooks:

And I think that that was the only way that they challenged it, and it's because I forced it on them. And that was actually at a point where I was having some... you know, internal... I was having an internal dilemma about how far can I push the class... So if I didn't bring the challenge, it's the textbook, they're still... you're in high school, you still think that what's in print is the only thing that exists. That's the only thing that's real, and it's right, and that's what you have to believe. So, on their own, I don't think they would challenge it very much. (Theresa)  
... as you kind of expand your repertoire [over time], the textbook is there, but you begin to use in a more critical way, you kind of encourage more critical literacy by revealing to the students that this is just one text, one interpretation of something, and there are lots of different texts over there... So it was interesting to see that, and I think when you point things out to them, they realize the process of how the text is written and how they're made and processed. It helps them to kind of do that on their own. Or at least to ask questions about it (Jeremy)

The remainder of interview participants report using textbooks in their classes using methods classified as dominated and negotiated. Most interviews contained examples of both of these—suggesting that teachers' pedagogical methods vary between dominated and negotiated readings depending on the topic and the class.<sup>7</sup>

Some teachers who incorporate negotiated methods describe challenges they face when introducing students to ways of questioning or disputing what is in a textbook. Some feel that students lacked practice in learning to ask the right kinds of questions since they are not exposed to this approach in their previous educational experiences. Those who raised this issue suggested also that it took time for them to learn to do this. For example, Veronica states, "I think I overestimated their initial capability there... I think they're trained to accept what they read, and so it takes a lot to kind of dislodge that idea."

Both survey and interview responses suggest that teachers who employ oppositional approaches to textbook use in philosophy classrooms are the minority. Given

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<sup>7</sup> For example statements reflecting dominant readings include:

I've basically taken its chapters, and broken each one of them down into a one page series of points. And that I'll make into an overhead, and teach the lesson that day... the book didn't come with any questions, and so I make the content, appropriate questions, they do the question sheet, and then I create from that again quizzes and unit tests, etc. (Benjamin)

Either, depending on the day and the subject matter, like if something's not overly important for university, I might just say, "Okay we'll cover this today, read it and answer the questions." But the way I like to do it is make sure the students read it beforehand... Yah, what we do make them do for each test is they have to memorize all these green words, like the terminology, and that's always part A on every test. (Philip)

Several teachers explain that they incorporate primary readings which are not in opposition to the textbook. Rather, they use primary sources to expose their students to the actual readings to which the textbook refers. Most responses coded as negotiated suggest that teachers dispute "small" items within the book—a particular term, argument, or strategy—rather than a broader position within the textbook, or a perspective which is missing

I've also told them I think textbook is wrong about some things... just talking about different understandings of terms and... you know, that's a part of what we do when we talk about definitions' needs to be critical... ok, so what's the definition that we're working with and just understanding where that person's perspective is coming from, and that's fine. (Sharon)

I encourage—that's a major goal of mine—that they would be able to look at the text and find holes in that text, find, you know, some wonky argument or strategy, that type of thing. That's a major goal of the course, I would say, that they read the text and challenge and question it. (Henry)

teachers' relatively favourable opinions of existing textbooks which arose out of our survey, this is not entirely surprising.

### *5.3 Reasons Behind Teachers' Approaches to Textbook Use*

Why do such a large proportion of these teachers avoid engaging students in our conception of an oppositional reading of textbooks? Certainly, opportunities exist for teachers to encourage different approaches to student reading. However, the data suggests that Ontario's philosophy teachers may not be in a position, for many reasons, to encourage students to interact with texts in a critical way. We explore the four factors which emerged out of our data.

#### *5.3.1. Lack of knowledge about or training in philosophy as a content area*

When teachers are unsure of specific content, they appear to feel greater need to rely on a textbook. Survey responses suggest that only a small proportion of high school philosophy teachers have formal training in philosophy. Significance testing revealed an important difference with respect to training and level of comfort teaching philosophy. When asked, "How would you rate your knowledge of philosophy as it relates to your comfort level in teaching high school philosophy courses?", respondents who studied philosophy at the university level report a higher level of comfort with the course ( $F[5, 47]=7.56, p<0.001$ ) than those with no formal training.<sup>8</sup>

Interviews revealed that some teachers report feeling uncomfortable taking a critical or oppositional approach simply because they have not acquired sufficient subject-matter knowledge, and so they rely heavily on the textbook's format as a professional crutch, and its content as an intellectual support. For example, when asked why he feels the need to conform closely to the textbook, Philip replies, "Well it's basically because of my inexperience, I guess you could say, like, if I was probably more confident with the subject matter and the curriculum." As Philip's testimony illustrates, a lack of confidence with philosophical subject matter affects a teacher's willingness to take a more creative approach and method beyond what appears in the textbook. Challenging or encouraging students to challenge textbook content without strong background knowledge becomes difficult for the teacher who is unfamiliar with the subject matter.

#### *5.3.2 Lack of pedagogical training or sophistication in critical thinking pedagogies as method*

Teachers may not be aware of, nor trained to facilitate critical inquiry among students which would be consistent with oppositional reading. Indeed, expertise in teaching critical thinking and argumentation is a challenge, particularly because materials for teachers

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<sup>8</sup> The largest proportion of teachers surveyed (32 or 60%) report that they took one or more university courses in philosophy, though it was not their major. Ten participants (19%) majored in philosophy during their undergraduate education. By far, the largest proportion of respondents (37 or 70%) report that they are certified to teach subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences: the disciplinary category in which philosophy is situated in Ontario's curriculum policy documents. Specific teachable subjects in that area include history, geography, individual and society, and politics. Those interviewed (see Table 1) have similar educational backgrounds.

“are based on a conception of critical thinking that is only vaguely related to the subject” (Fisher & Scriven, 1997). Not all teachers have been exposed to literature, pedagogical supports or professional development which might contribute to a strong understanding of these concepts.<sup>9</sup> If philosophy is truly unique in challenging the status quo as we illustrated, then it not only has to resist the normalizing factors established by the dominance of other subjects in the school, it also has to resist the internal pressure to look like these subjects and patterned teacher behaviour which tends to reduce teaching and learning relationships to content delivery. Some teachers interviewed hadn’t considered the possibility of challenging the text with oppositional readings. For instance, when asked if he incorporates readings that challenge textbook content, Darius is “not sure how you would.”

It goes without saying that teachers evolve in their pedagogical styles and practices as they gain experience and new knowledge. Theresa tells the story of moving away from “teaching to the final exam” in her philosophy course. She describes her early experience: “I wanted them to memorize [things from the textbook] ... And then I hated myself for doing that.” She then moved to a more negotiated approach of textbook use in an attempt to mirror what she describes as pedagogies used in university courses.

### *5.3.3 Belief that students are not capable of oppositional thinking and learning*

Some of the teachers interviewed expressed the perception that few, if any, students in high school are capable of challenging textbooks and readings in an oppositional way. For instance, Karl states, “Unless you are an expert or a fourth-year philosophy student, you wouldn’t know to take issues with what the textbook says.”

Despite this perception, two interviewees described practices which are consistent with oppositional reading, suggesting that it is indeed possible to be successful in promoting an oppositional form of reading among high school students.

### *5.3.4 Pressure to meet policy expectations*

Despite teachers’ highest levels of dispositional and rhetorical commitment to critical thinking and (to a lesser degree) argumentation, teaching methods have has a way of drifting towards a state of passive reception of ideas, particularly in an education environment where content-laden policy documents encourage the postponement of critical reflection (Passmore 1967). The increasing pressure on Ontario’s teachers to be accountable for meeting provincially-imposed curricular expectations can be addressed by using a textbook that is deemed a “100% match” to the policy expectations. The shortcoming of

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<sup>9</sup> Despite ample theoretical work in the literature about teaching critical thinking, though largely focused on post-secondary study, research indicates that the general population of teachers lack the preparation and resources to effectively teach for critical thinking (Paul, Elder & Bartell 1997; Case 2009; Blair 2009). This appears to be exacerbated by an environment in which high-stakes testing and teacher accountability result in a focus on skills and knowledge for test preparation at the expense of critical thinking (Pithers & Soden 2000). Many contemporary high-stakes standardized tests and teacher accountability models tend to focus on regurgitation of facts over meaning, with narrow conceptions of “correct” answers as evidence of student learning (e.g., Vinson et al. 2001; Noddings 2004; Caputo-Pearl 2001 and others). Indeed, research suggests that teachers who follow “guidelines in curriculum documents do not seem to teach thinking well” (Pithers & Soden 2000: 247).

narrow, accountability-driven educational practice “has led to a demand that we know what is being achieved; to know, we have to be able to document, which in turn requires that we can measure” (Hare 2000:105).

Four of the teachers interviewed express perceived pressure to address all mandated curriculum policy expectations. Some positively comment on the textbooks' ability to ensure this:

I'd say that textbook resource that we have like if you put it side to side with the curriculum document, yah, that's in the textbook here, that's in the textbook here, and I could just go through the curriculum probably write this section like 6.4, 6.4, yah that's covered in 6.4, I'd say it's almost down right to a tee the textbook we use, that we cover the curriculum. (Philip)  
I liked it so much because it follows the curriculum so you don't feel like you have to balance between the textbook and then the curriculum, so it kind of does it for you. (Veronica)

Our research suggests that feelings of pressure to adhere to curriculum policy is *not* related to years of teaching experience—the level experience among these teachers ranges between two and twenty-five. Only one teacher interviewed, Jeremy, explicitly talks about his resistance to conforming to curriculum policy as he gained more experience teaching the course:

I resisted the pressure to cover everything the way I had in the beginning. So that I could tailor the course more to the students' interests and needs. (Jeremy)

These statements illustrate that teachers' perceived need to follow curriculum policy expectations vary. While some teachers (such as Philip and Veronica) may be more concerned with teaching for content as defined in curriculum policy, others resist policy, modifying their courses to address students' interests, and emphasizing depth of understanding over breadth of knowledge.

## 6. DISCUSSION: EXPLORING THE ABSENCE OF OPPOSITIONAL USE

Our data analysis describes what types of textbooks Ontario high school philosophy teachers use, what approaches teachers take to their use, and their reasons behind those approaches. First, our findings about the predominance of textbook use among high school philosophy teachers who participated in this research is consistent with the literature on significant textbook use described earlier. As others have found, high school philosophy teachers in Ontario rely on textbooks frequently, particularly with respect to the use of secondary sources as opposed to primary readings.

Second, despite claims about the uniqueness of philosophy as a discipline which relies on critical inquiry, we observe an absence of oppositional approaches to textbook use which would be consistent with those ideals. A high school philosophy program:

might have the advantage of helping students to continue asking significant questions, keeping open the road to inquiry and to alternatives, investing less in infallible answers than in a rigorous method, and analyzing and evaluating their own decisions in a world that has never been in greater need of rethinking in such matters. (Ayim 1980: 21)

Despite these ideals, the approaches to textbook use identified by teachers are somewhat disappointing. We might hope that intellectual challenges would be exemplified in an

oppositional approach to textbook use. If, as our data suggest, most teachers do not engage in oppositional approaches, students may not have opportunities to develop and refine the kinds of critical thinking and argumentation that are central to philosophical thought when engaging in core readings. Moreover, depending on how students interact with the textbook and the content of it, we risk a situation of unintentional indoctrination (Lammi 1997). However, this situation does not imply that students have no opportunities for this type of inquiry—indeed, many other ways in which teachers might engage students in critical thought and argumentation exist which do not involve textbooks. Further investigation into teachers’ pedagogical practices would shed greater light on the role of this type of teaching in Ontario’s high school philosophy courses.

Finally, the study identified four perceived barriers to the use of oppositional textbook readings with students. First, we found that teachers with little training or a perceived lack of knowledge about philosophy tended to rely more heavily on textbooks. These teachers use textbooks to compensate for a perceived lack of philosophical knowledge or training.<sup>10</sup> Related to this, our data also revealed a lack of knowledge about how to facilitate critical inquiry consistent with an oppositional approach to textbook use. Blair (2009) and Case (2009) argue that teachers in general are neither provided with the tools or pedagogies to effectively teach critical thinking, and the same might be true of argumentation.<sup>11</sup> Additional training, emerging now that philosophy is recognized as a teachable qualification as of 2010, may address these two barriers and lead to changes. As well, teachers’ confidence in challenging publicly what they themselves are only just learning may be low for fear of undermining their classroom authority (Nuthall 2004). In this way, these teachers may, at least temporarily, be reduced to maintaining classroom order as a survival mechanism (Nuthall 2004; Marton 1994; Fischler 1999).

A third barrier to the oppositional approach to textbook use was a perception among some teachers that students may not be capable of this type of thought. Contrary to this belief, evidence suggests that adolescent students are indeed capable of oppositional reading, albeit with the guidance and encouragement of their teachers (e.g., Moshman 2005; Stanovich 2001; Sternberg 2001). Moreover, the success of teachers interviewed in taking an oppositional approach with students—coupled with the success of *Philosophy for Children*—further confirms that presuppositions of students’ inability to engage in oppositional reading are false.

The fourth barrier, which is adherence to Ministry curriculum policy expectations at the expense of an oppositional approach, is consistent with previous arguments in the literature (e.g., Pithers & Soden 2000; Vinson et al. 2001; Noddings 2004; Caputo-Pearl 2001). Revisions to Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum policy documents in light of Blair’s (2009) critique might address this particular reason for this absence.

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<sup>10</sup> This lack of comfort and preparedness is consistent with similar findings by Smith and Desimone (2005), who report that higher levels of formal mathematics education leads to stronger content knowledge and teachers’ self-perception of preparedness to teach math.

<sup>11</sup> For example, “Such tasks will require a sustained, multi-year commitment by those well-positioned to bring about change in our educational systems (both in schools and faculties of education)” (Blair 2009: 278).

## 7. CONCLUSION

In spite of the hope that the study of Philosophy will encourage critical thinking and argumentation, teachers are apparently so content-driven, “insecure” with the subject matter, or unaware of how to teach for critical thinking and argumentation in a subject that they have managed to make it “the study *of* thinkers” rather than “the study of *how to think with* thinkers.” This amounts to little more than hoping that oppositional reading will emerge by osmosis with content, rather than through the practice of critical thinking and argumentation. Our findings call for teacher training in these areas, and revisions to the current curriculum which would better support teachers’ inclusion of them.

Our study also points to several areas for further research to better understand textbook use in high school philosophy classrooms. Students’ perspectives on textbooks and their use in high school philosophy classrooms would provide a richer understanding of how teachers and students interact with texts, and the degree to which teacher direction affects students’ readings. Finally, further research is necessary to better understand the content of frequently-used textbooks.

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# Commentary on “HIGH SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY TEACHERS’ USE OF TEXTBOOKS: CRITICAL THINKING OR TEACHING TO THE TEXT?” by Laura Pinto and Graham McDonough

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of philosophy into the secondary school curriculum in Ontario is a move which is widely applauded by philosophers. We believe in the value, both intrinsic and instrumental, of philosophy and tend to view its early introduction as a positive step. The question which arises, however, is whether philosophy is being taught in a way that is appropriate to the subject and exploits its educational possibilities. Pinto’s and McDonough’s overall project of investigating what is actually happening in the classroom with respect to the teaching of philosophy is thus a worthwhile enterprise and a much needed one.

One common assumption regarding the teaching of philosophy is that it will promote critical thinking. I applaud Pinto’s and McDonough’s endeavour to see whether this assumption is valid in the context of the way philosophy is actually being taught. There are numerous aspects of curriculum and pedagogy that one could investigate to try and answer this question (and I gather that these form part of their larger project), but in this paper they look particularly at textbook use, addressing the question: does the way textbooks are used promote critical thinking?

A somewhat puzzling aspect of their approach, however, is that they do not actually look at the textbooks themselves, their content or prescribed pedagogy (although they may do this elsewhere), but rather analyze how the texts are used by means of a generic framework describing various types of readings. They argue that one type of reading, oppositional reading, is necessary for critical thinking and base their empirical research on this assumption. I find this approach problematic, however. I shall question two of the assumptions behind their approach: 1) that one certain specified form of interacting with textbooks (oppositional reading) is necessary for promoting critical thinking, and 2) that one can make judgments about whether a textbook is used in a way which fosters critical thinking apart from any consideration of the content of the textbook.

## 2. OPPOSITIONAL READING

The framework, from Apple and Christian Smith, which the authors employ as the basis for analyzing their findings identifies three ways in which readers interact with texts. In the dominated approach, the reader accepts the message of the text at face value. In the negotiated approach, the reader may dispute portions of the text but accepts the overall

interpretations. In the oppositional approach, the reader challenges the content, interpretations, or perspectives of the text. The authors argue that it is only the oppositional approach which is consistent with critical thinking, and, moreover, that a failure to implement an oppositional approach transforms teaching into a kind of indoctrination.

What the authors looked for in their study as evidence of oppositional reading was whether teachers provided points of view that contradicted the textbook, presented an alternative point of view, or discussed the inclusion/exclusion of diverse perspectives. I would argue that the assumption that critical thinking requires this type of oppositional reading rests on Apple's social constructivist view of knowledge. On this view, the relevant critical questions that can be asked of any knowledge claims are whose knowledge is it, how did it become socially legitimated, whose interests does it serve. This view of knowledge is certainly not uncontested, however. I would argue, as would many others, that knowledge (public knowledge at least) is not something of which one can appropriately ask "whose is it." Rather, the appropriate critical question would be one of justification, not ownership—"(How) is it justified?" Seeking justification will in many cases involved checking for bias as well as investigating whether there are alternative accounts or theories. And if some alternative accounts or perspectives are not present, it would be appropriate, in some contexts, to ask why. For example, if, in a history textbook, the account of Jacques Cartier's first encounter with First Nations people is told entirely from the point of view of Cartier and his group, then it would be appropriate not only to note the absence of the native perspective but also to ask why that perspective has been excluded. I think that the most apt way to characterize this type of stance toward what one reads is critical rather than oppositional. And what constitutes a critical interaction with a particular text will depend on the content.

### 3. TEXTBOOK CONTENT

This brings me to the second assumption, that one can make judgments about whether a textbook is used in a way which fosters critical thinking apart from any consideration of the content of the textbook. I would argue that what constitutes a critical use of a textbook depends on the textbook—its content and suggested pedagogy. The kind of critical questions which the authors subsume under oppositional reading may make sense for an account of a historical event, where part of the critical project would be asking critical questions regarding who wrote the account and why, who is left out of the account and of the telling (as in the example above). The relevance of such questions is much less obvious in a text that may offer a number of accounts and perspectives and/or include critical questions as a central part of its methodology (e.g., critical thinking/informal logic texts).

Given my claim, it seemed appropriate to actually look at one of the textbooks that it used in the Ontario curriculum, *Philosophy: Questions and Theories* (Paquette & Ginni-Newman 2003). The aspects taken up by the text are learning about philosophy as an enterprise; learning its history both in terms of the history of the enterprise and the historical development of the main questions; and engaging in philosophy. A critical interaction with the text would, I would think, involve engaging in questions about meaning, interpretation, argumentation, and the comparative justification of positions. I can see how posing some of the 'oppositional' questions with respect to material on the history of philosophy could be appropriate, for example, is this a complete and balanced account,

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are there perspective that are left out (e.g., is it Eurocentric? gender-biased? etc.) (interestingly, this particular text seems quite inclusive, e.g., including female philosophers, Asian philosophy etc.). Equating such questions with a critical interaction with the text seems highly problematic.

This is particularly the case as much of the text focuses explicitly on engaging in philosophy and is replete with exercises and examples which engage students in philosophical inquiry. The following is one example which follows on an excerpt from Plato's cave allegory.

Plato makes several assumptions about how the released prisoner would react and how others would react to him. Create a counter-argument to one of these assumptions, clearly explaining why you disagree with Plato's position. Explain how this changed assumption would affect the philosophical position reflected in this allegory. (Paquette & Ginni-Newman 2003: 9).

The critical dimension here is already contained in the contents of the textbook.

I think that the authors are investigating an important question and have unearthed some very rich and revealing data. They are, however, hampered by their framework for analysis. In order to discover to what extent teachers are using these textbooks in a way that promotes critical thinking, it is necessary to look at the content and pedagogy of the text and to ask whether teachers are engaging students in philosophical inquiry via the textbook. This will involve taking an appropriately critical, and sometimes oppositional approach to material in the text, but will often involve using the text in precisely the manner in which it was intended.

It is, of course, the case that texts can be misused, as for example, if an instructor asked students to simply rehearse the arguments given in the text for and against free will rather than having them comparatively evaluate the arguments and come to a reasoned judgment themselves. And it strikes me that it is precisely this type of misuse that Pinto's and McDonough's research reveals. The lack of training in philosophy and in critical thinking instruction pointed to by the study is a cause for serious concern.

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