

JUST SAY WHAT YOU REALLY THINK ABOUT DRUGS: CULTIVATING DRUG LITERACY THROUGH ENGAGED PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY (EPI)

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Abstract

Research has shown that “no use” drug education programs, with the objective of scaring or shaming youth into abstinence, have not been effective in addressing problematic substance use. The ineffectiveness of such scare tactic approaches has led program developers to focus on prevention and harm reduction associated with drug use, or in general, health literacy promotion. While significant ‘discussion-based’ drug education programs have been developed over the past decade and has encouraged students to be expressive and critical thinkers regarding drug use, their effective implementation has been a challenge. This paper introduces Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) as a pedagogical approach in order to promote drug literacy. The EPI approach is used both as the content and means of professional development for high school teachers to address the significant role of teachers in these programs. Its goal is to help teachers become aware of and re-evaluate their biases, beliefs and behaviors, before they are able to facilitate a non-stereotyped, open, and thoughtful discussion on drug use related topics. The overall idea of this paper is based on an in-progress research project sponsored by Mitacs organization. It discusses the significance of the project by first presenting the existing methods and theoretical approaches to drug education. On that basis, it shows how EPI can contribute to traditional drug education approaches. It then describes how the methodology and phases of the project are rooted in a dialogical process that aim for a close collaboration with teachers.

Keywords: Philosophical inquiry; drug education and drug literacy; teacher training and professional development

Sólo di qué piensas realmente acerca de las drogas: concientización acerca de las drogas a través de la indagación filosófica comprometida

Resumen

La investigación ha mostrado que los programas educativos del tipo la droga “no sirve” cuyo objetivo es lograr la abstinencia, a través de asustar y avergonzar a los jóvenes, no ha sido efectivo en el tratamiento del uso de sustancias peligrosas. La ineficacia de tal enfoque ha llevado a quienes desarrollan programas a centrarse en la prevención y reducción de daños asociados al consumo de drogas o en la promoción de la educación de la salud en general. Aunque los significativos programas educativos “basados en la discusión” sobre drogas han sido desarrollados durante la pasada década y han estimulado a los estudiante a ser

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pensadores expresivos y críticos respecto del uso de drogas, su aplicación ha sido un desafío. Este artículo presenta la Discusión Filosófica Comprometida como un enfoque pedagógico que promueve el conocimiento sobre las drogas. Este enfoque es utilizado tanto como contenido cuanto como medio para el desarrollo profesional de los profesores del secundario que asumen el importante papel de profesores en estos programas. Su objetivo es ayudar a los profesores a que tomen conciencia de sus prejuicios, creencias, hábitos y puedan re evaluarlos antes de ser capaces de facilitar una discusión no estereotipada, abierta y reflexiva sobre el tema en cuestión. La idea general de este artículo se basa en un proyecto de investigación en curso patrocinado por la organización MITACS. Se discute la importancia del proyecto presentando en primer lugar los métodos y enfoques teóricos existentes sobre el uso de drogas. Sobre esta base se muestra cómo la Discusión Filosófica Comprometida puede contribuir a los enfoques tradicionales sobre la enseñanza de drogas. A continuación se describe cómo la metodología y las fases del programa se basan en un proceso dialógico que apunta a una estrecha colaboración con los maestros.

Palabras clave: Discusión filosófica, educación sobre drogas, formación y desarrollo docente.

Apenas diga o que realmente você pensa sobre drogas: cultivando a educação sobre drogas através da Comunidade de Investigação Filosófica

Resumo

Pesquisas mostram que o programa educativo de prevenção ao uso de drogas, cujo objetivo é assustar ou inibir os jovens a fim de mantê-los na abstinência, não foi efetivo no que tange ao problema da toxicodependência. A ineficácia dessas táticas assustadoras de aproximação ao problema levou aos idealizadores do programa a focar na prevenção e na diminuição do prejuízo associados ao uso de drogas, ou, mais genericamente, na promoção de educação em saúde. Embora significativos programas educativos desenvolvidos nas últimas décadas tenham utilizado a metodologia do debate e, assim, encorajado os estudantes a se expressarem e a serem pensadores críticos em relação ao uso da droga, suas efetivas implementações têm sido um desafio. Esse artigo apresenta a Comunidade de Investigação Filosófica como uma aproximação pedagógica a fim de promover uma educação sobre drogas. Essa abordagem é usada tanto como conteúdo quanto como meios para o desenvolvimento profissional de professores do ensino médio a fim de que os professores assumam seus papéis significativos nesses programas. O objetivo central dessa abordagem é ajudar os professores a tomarem ciência e reavaliar seus preconceitos, suas crenças e comportamentos para que estejam preparados para facilitar uma discussão não estereotipada, senão aberta e reflexiva, sobre os temas relacionados ao uso de drogas. A ideia geral desse artigo está baseada num projeto de pesquisa em andamento financiado pela organização Mitacs. É discutido, aqui, a importância desse projeto primeiramente apresentando os métodos e as abordagens teóricas existentes na área. A partir de então, é mostrado como a Comunidade de Investigação Filosófica pode contribuir para a abordagem tradicional da educação sobre drogas. Finalmente, o artigo descreve como a metodologia e as fases do projetos estão ancoradas num processo dialógico que aspira a uma estreita colaboração com os professores.

Palavras-chave: investigação filosófica; educação sobre drogas; formação e desenvolvimento docente

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Introduction

The following paper is based on an in-progress research project funded by Mitacs—an organization that builds partnerships between academia and industry. Our reasons to write about an in-progress study are two-fold: a. we would like to discuss the significance of the project by presenting existing methods and theories around drug education and show how Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) can contribute to those more traditional approaches, and b. we would like to provide an example of how philosophical inquiry can be used in the ‘industrial sector’ to help with pressing educational questions and social concerns. With the latter we hope to be an encouragement for anyone working towards bringing philosophical inquiry to educational contexts.

We will start by discussing existing drug education approaches. Secondly, we will show how EPI addresses this need. And lastly, we will describe how the methodology and phases of the project themselves are rooted in a dialogical approach that aim for a close collaboration with teachers and their specific classroom contexts.

1. Drug Education as an Industrial Venture? An Autobiographical Preface

Winning the Mitacs Elevate Post-doctoral Fellowship was the last thing on my mind when I set forth to move to Canada to pursue my graduate studies. Meeting Barbara Weber at the University of British Columbia inspired me to learn and practice Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI), and to apply for Mitacs funding. As a Canadian non-profit research and training organization, Mitacs builds partnerships between academia, industry, and the world. The history of this fellowship shows that most of the applicants and award recipients of Mitacs Elevate are usually from the fields of Science. Motivated by this gap and the somewhat ‘hostile’ climate towards

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education, I did find an industry partner, called ARC Programs Ltd. (Adolescent Residential Care)³, and applied for this funding⁴. The shared goal of this collaboration was to use EPI in drug education programs for children and youth. More specifically, it is now the goal of this project to use EPI to expand on existing dialogical approaches in drug literacy and improve effective implementation of drug education programs within the ARC Programs Ltd. and participating schools⁵.

2. A Brief History of Drug Education: Existing Methods and Theoretical Approaches

In the past decades, several ‘informational’ school-based drug education programs have been developed that conveyed a strict “no-use” message regarding substance use (e.g. D.A.R.E.-- Drug Abuse Resistance Education, The Truth about Drugs). The ineffectiveness of these approaches (Beck, 1998; Brown, 2001; Peters et al., 2009) led program developers in B.C. to focus on ‘discussion-based’ forms of preventions with the aim of reducing harmful patterns of use and promoting what is called a drug literacy – that is, promoting the knowledge and skills needed to manage substance use (such as *RoadSense*, ICBC, 2006; *iMinds*, CARBC, 2010-2013;). These new drug education programs acknowledge the complex relationships humans have always had with drugs - at all times and in all cultures. Instead of sending out a ‘no use’ message, the goal is now to touch base with the real life situation of young people today; i.e. to cultivate opportunities for authentic dialogue where their questions, curiosities, thoughts and emotions regarding drug use are being taken seriously. The hope is to foster critical thinking and communication skills that will

³ ARC Programs Ltd. is a multi-service agency based in Kelowna, BC, operating in various communities of the southern Interior. They develop programs to support children and youth to avoid or address substance misuse.

⁴ It is interesting that in 2014, I was the only applicant and recipient of Mitacs Elevate Post-doctoral Fellowship in my cohort from Education in the West: including Alberta, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia (Personal communication with Dr. Alison Ewart, Director, Mitacs Accelerate and Elevate). This shows it is not usual to connect education, and in particular philosophy, to the world of industry.

⁵ ARC Programs Ltd. collaborates with the Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia (CARBC) to promote children and youth health and reduce harm.

help them navigate through a world where drug use is common (CARBC). While these significant 'discussion-based' drug education programs encourage students to be expressive and critical thinkers about their drug use beliefs and ideas, one cannot overlook the significant role of teachers and the impact of their personal and professional ideas on the *effective implementation* of these programs (Tatto, 1998). In fact, working within a framework where "honest, thoughtful discussions" (e.g. iMinds; SACY⁶) are encouraged, the teachers' openness towards the topic at stake, along with a clarity regarding her own biases, values and beliefs, precedes the quality of dialogue and discussion with students. This is why the Canadian educator, Sue McGregor (2004, p. 1) states powerfully, "We teach who we are,"⁷ because teachers cannot 'strip off' their identities before entering the classroom.

This is why the purpose of this project is to use Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) both as the content and means of professional development for teachers. Doing so, we seek to help teachers develop facilitation skills that will promote critical thinking and authentic communication in their classrooms, while on a qualitative level re-shaping the "deep structures" that operate on the teachers' awareness regarding their own biases, values, attitudes and behaviours. Those 'deep structures' are of core importance, because they will guide the teachers' understanding and valuation of the subject matter. Furthermore, their unconscious behaviour, usage of vocabulary and speech will impact students' understanding of drug education as well as their willingness to even engage in an authentic dialogue around drugs (Holmes, 1995). More specifically, and according to Holmes (1995), if teachers ideas are simple and isolate, it may be concluded that "the deep structure comment to students would be stereotyped (e.g. 'you are who you are, probably a druggie, and you cannot change'), superficial (focusing on social comportment as an index of moral agreement), bifurcative (e.g. 'us vs. them'), and defensive (identify is knowing who

⁶School Age Children and Youth

⁷ There has been a debate on *Who* this quote belongs to or *Who* used it first.

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you are not)" (p.8). However, if teachers' ideas are complex and inclusive, "the deep structure comments to students would be *non-stereotyped* (open, complex, multi-level), *deep* (focusing on an understanding of the student's motivation, experiences, emotion, reason), *inclusive* (oriented about shared perception), and *identify making* (identify is knowing who you are)" (p.8). In summary, we believe that being *open* to different ideas and questions, and taking young people's sometimes disturbing questions seriously, can open up the possibility for the sort of long-overdue open exchange between generations that is necessary in any educational dialogue (Weber, 2009).

3. Drug Literacy through Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI): Reasons and Methods

Our reasons for using Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) as our pedagogy are: a) to foster critical thinking and communication skills through open and authentic dialogue spaces, and b) to reveal biases, beliefs and assumptions within students and teachers by addressing the underlying philosophical questions behind topics that concern drug use.

a. Fostering Critical Thinking and Communication Skills through an Open and Authentic Dialogue

Today, children are born into a complex, diverse, and quickly changing environment where they inevitably will be exposed to a wide range of conflicting attitudes, perspectives, and life choices from different and powerful influential groups. In the matter of substance use in particular, children encounter a variety of attitudes and behaviours: e.g. they see people drinking when celebrating their successes, birthdays or get together for special events; they experience people using drugs when dealing with pain, grief or sadness; or they meet people who use drugs to pursue spiritual insight.

In British Columbia, Canada, and according to Health Canada (2012-2013), alcohol is the most common substance used by students in grades 7 to 12. The statistics show that 41% of the students in these grades reported using alcohol in the year preceding the survey. On average, youth consumed their first alcoholic beverage at 13.1 years of age. Furthermore, among grades 7-12 students, marijuana is the substance with the highest prevalence after alcohol. That is, one in five students reported using marijuana in the past 12 months. The prevalence of youth trying smoking a cigarette among grades 6 to 9 has been 13% in 2012-2013.

Being exposed to peer pressure, conflicting attitudes towards drug use and other powerful influential groups (e.g. advertisement, idols like pop stars or actors) children have to hold a tricky balance: i.e. they are expected to seriously consider differences in opinion, while comprehending that such an empathetic 'understanding of the other' does not necessarily mean to agree with the other nor to do the same as the other. This is why it is important that children acquire the tools and communicative practice to think for themselves while they empathically understand and consider other points of views.⁸ Research has shown that using EPI as a teaching and learning method improves students' higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking and their ability to analyze (Lim, 2006; Daniel et al, 2005; Laverly & Gregory, 2007). Furthermore, it positively impacts their cognitive abilities (Fisher, 2007; Lyle & Thomas-Williams, 2012), promotes their social-emotional competences and social responsibility (Daniel et al., 2000; Topping and Trickey, 2004; Soweiy, 2012). Yet, despite the obvious positive impact that EPI has directly on the development of critical thinking and communication skills, we believe that drug education needs to go deeper in order to address the underlying emotions, motivations and reasons for using drugs.

⁸ And the urgency to equip children with those competencies is also reflected by the BC Ministry of education promoting critical thinking and communication skills as two of the core competencies for children growing up in a plural society.

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b. Unpacking Common Assumptions, Beliefs and Biases by Addressing the Underlying Philosophical Questions Regarding Drug Use

We believe that a standard critical program will only scratch at the surface by only dealing with pleaded ‘rationalizations’ or superficial motivation. This is so because all the preceding biases, negative associations, fascinations, fears and assumptions, both by teachers and students, often prevent an authentic⁹ and open¹⁰ dialogue regarding drug use. Thus, the first step is to create a safe and warm dialogue atmosphere where children can speak without fear about their emotions and motivations for using drugs. At first, they might not even be aware of what lays beneath superficial reasons like peer pressure, curiosity, fear, stress, or recognition and alike. Here we have to come to the awareness that common biases, convictions and beliefs regarding drug use are connected to a much wider, richer and more complex network of questions, values and topics that concern human life as well as how we want to live in a world with others. This is why we use EPI in order to ‘push through’ those superficial motivations, biases and beliefs and address the underlying philosophical problems and topics. Examples here are: What is health? What does it mean to be courageous? Why do I want to be recognized? Who am I? What is friendship? What are the boundaries of consciousness? Is it important to be afraid?

The pedagogical reasoning behind this is that we cannot (and maybe also do not want to) ‘control’ young people’s lives and decisions. However, what we *can* provide are open dialogue spaces where they explore and become aware (with the help of philosophical methods and in a community with others) of their underlying feelings, thought patterns and biases. Ideally they will develop the skills and courage to keep considering diverse perspectives and reasons; and by doing so they’ll develop

⁹ By ‘authentic’ we mean the honest investigation and expression of one’s own emotions, motivations and reasons.

¹⁰ By ‘open’ we mean to actually consider the various points of view.

a kind of 'inner vertical'. This 'inner vertical' is a place of tension and suspension and similar to the balance of a dancer, this vertical is something that has to be found again and again. Thus, in addition of being a 'critical thinker', we aim to cultivate 'authentic and courageous reasoning' that always steers to the source of our motivations. By doing so, we hope to help children make more 'aware and thoughtful decisions' (rather than finding the 'right decision') by taking into account the various viewpoints, arguments and possible consequences for oneself and for others when navigating through complex and ambiguous life situations.

Furthermore, we believe that not only students have to unveil their biases, but also teachers need to become aware of and re-evaluate their biases, beliefs and convictions before they are able to facilitate a non-stereotyped, open, and thoughtful dialogue on drug use related topics. To do so, teachers have to let go of a more traditional approach to drug education where they only look at the 'assumed' misconceptions of students, while they themselves simply provide the "approved truth" about drugs. In order to reconstruct those old habits of teaching, we will help teachers face and understand their own fears, questions and experiences regarding drug use. Here, a hermeneutical approach will be helpful, especially when it comes to the process of questioning. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: "The openness of the questioned contains the openness of the as yet undetermined answer [...] Every real question demands this openness. If it lacks this openness, then it is only a 'fake question' [...] for example, the didactical question" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 369). When teachers are asked to take a discussion-based approach towards drug literacy (instead of an information based approach) they need to step back from the pedagogical patterns where they ask questions to which the answers they already know. However, for such new possibilities and meanings to unfold through collaboration with students, teachers have to challenge their own identity, core values and beliefs (Gadamer, 1989; Weber, 2013). This is not an easy step for teachers (and for anyone), because as Gadamer points out further: "To be able to question means 'to

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want to know' and 'to want to know' means 'to know that one doesn't know'" (p. 369). This 'not knowing' (*docta ignorantia*) is not an abstract 'state of the mind,' but rather has to be related to a 'something', i.e., a specific aspect of one's life. Gadamer says, "The essence of the question is that it is meaningful to the questioner. This meaning is the space that the question opens and within which only a meaningful answer can be given" (p. 368). In this sense, questions are never completely open, because otherwise they would be meaningless (i.e., unrelated to a specific human experience). Rather, the very aspect of the world that becomes 'questionable' is placed in a clear relationship to one's own identity and values; and answering it will change how we position ourselves towards or within the world. Only then will the answer be a real 'experience', i.e. resulting to a change in how we live or perceive the world. This is why this process can be deeply existential and even scary, both for teachers and students. Or as Gadamer's teacher, Martin Heidegger (1977), writes: "Questioning builds a way [...] The way is a way of thinking. All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary." (p. 3) It is 'extraordinary' because it disturbs the pre-existing order and it urges us to question ourselves as much as others.

4. Methodology:

a. The EPI Approach

Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) is a way of facilitating a democratic and open-ended dialogue between people around bigger and smaller questions about life, knowledge, value, and meaning (Lipman, 2001). In an EPI session, the participants have the opportunity to *think, reflect, and reason together* while they are exposed to different perspectives of one another. In this sense, EPI uses Lipman's 'community of inquiry' as developed for the Philosophy for Children program. However, and differently from Lipman, EPI tries to engage and incorporate plural forms of philosophical dialogue. Here, we refer to the German philosopher Ekkehart Martens

who developed the 'Five-Finger-Model': Going back to Plato's Socratic dialogues, he unfolds five philosophical methods, namely phenomenology, hermeneutic, dialectic, logic and speculation. Those methods are not associated with a specific philosopher or history in time, but rather are ways of approaching a problem or question through thinking and dialogue. In that sense, all five methods may occur within only one philosophical dialogue or only one method might be dominant. The overall goal, similar to Lipman's, is to reanimate philosophy as a cultural practice, just like reading, writing or arithmetic (Martens, 1999). The facilitator sits at the nexus between philosophical discourse and concrete life and supports the disclosure of deeper layers of meaning and questions.

For our project, we have developed a curriculum and set of materials, based on those elements. The materials include a teacher's guide, some sample EPI discussion plans (on topics of courage/bravery, identity, reality, and recognition), handouts, readings, resources, and a brochure. The materials will be polished as we implement the project and interact with teachers. That is, our participating teachers will try out the suggested materials and give us their comments and feedback. We will then incorporate those comments and improve the materials to fit exactly with our teachers' contexts and classroom situations. Moreover, we will coach our teachers to find their own style of facilitation as well as guide them through reflections regarding their own ideas, biases, and assumptions on drug use. The entire process will be dialogical and interactive in order to ensure a meaningful implementation of EPI. How we will ensure the dialogical nature of this project will now be explained in more detail.

b. Design

Effective drug education programs mainly depend on the availability of professional learning opportunities for teachers, educators and supportive school environments. While many teachers and educators embrace the shift in drug

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education goal from adopting a pre-defined behaviour to developing capacity for making thoughtful decisions, their training and assumptions about drugs get in the way of effective implementation. This means that the first step is to change the system within which teaching and learning occur. Such a critical step will help to train and support teachers in order to gain the knowledge and pedagogical skills to implement discussion-based programs more effectively. Within this framework, we believe that EPI can help as a dialogic approach to work both as a way to get teachers to rethink some of their existing assumptions and biases, and as a pedagogy for them to learn and use in the classroom. As a result, our methodology includes a more *dialogic* approach than an experimental one.

c. Procedures

This research includes two phases of implementation:

Phase 1-EPI, Theory and Practice: This phase involves providing participants with initial training including:

- a) *EPI Workshops – Theory:* It includes presentations on the 'theoretical' aspects of EPI such as what EPI is, what the benefits of using EPI as a pedagogical approach are, and the like. The teachers will go through some short readings we will provide for them and participate in the discussions and open dialogues we will have during the workshops. The workshops will run via tele-conferencing for 2-4 weeks, 90 minutes per week.
- b) *EPI Workshops – Practice:* The workshops will familiarize teachers with a few methods of facilitating EPI and how to apply those to different learning environments. To help teachers with the application of EPI, we will give different examples and facilitate discussions on drug-related topics in the workshops.

Phase 2-EPI Implementation Follow-up: We will follow the facilitation/application of EPI with our participating teachers who use EPI through forming "inquiry group"

sessions. In these groups, which will be run *online for 2-4 weeks, 90 minutes per week*, the application of EPI will be discussed in order to address teachers' challenges and experiences (e.g. what questions students ask, what teachers hesitations and needs are to facilitate dialogues around such questions, etc.).

Interviews: To get an in-depth understanding of the teachers' points of views about EPI and its application, we will conduct short interviews with the participants at the end of two phases; i.e., 1) at the end of the workshops, and 2) at the end of the application of EPI by the participants in their practices. The interviews will also focus on teachers' professional ideas on drug education in relation to how non-stereotyped, deep, and inclusive they are. The findings about these interviews will be reflected in the curriculum and materials accordingly.

d. Participants

Our participants will be approximately 10 teachers of grades 5-7 in school districts in Interior, British Columbia, that are willing to implement new strategies and programs in the area of drug education. The project team will seek to ensure the participating schools represent the range of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity of both teachers and students in the school interior region. Grades 5-7 are chosen because the age period between 11 to 14 years is of great importance. It is during this developmental period that children's personalities, behaviors, and competencies may consolidate into forms that persist into adolescence and into adulthood (Eccles & Roeser 2009).

e. Data analysis

There will be an ongoing qualitative analysis of the dialogues that occur throughout the workshops as well as the dialogues that happen within the 'inquiry groups' among teachers. We are hoping that through using EPI, teachers examine their assumptions, biases and views toward 'drug education change' in favour of the

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increasing capacity for making thoughtful decisions rather than promoting a 'no use' approach. We will use the interview data to see how they have perceived the EPI dialogue and discussions, and also the effect of EPI on their ideas and assumptions. We are also hoping that teachers' abilities to implement and facilitate democratic discussions around drugs in their classrooms will improve from pre- to post training (inquiry groups). To support our qualitative analysis, quotations will be incorporated selectively throughout the analysis to illustrate such changes, but also to address problems and concerns more clearly.

5. Final Words:

We would like to end this paper with an educational response to media discourse on the value, importance, and application of philosophy to education and for everyday life. On April 30th, 2014, the *Vancouver Sun* reports that "the government will be asking post-secondary institutions to focus their training programs and courses on what it calls high-demand occupations and concedes that some courses like philosophy will lose out to business, commerce and sciences." The former head of the philosophy department at UBC, Dr. Alan Richardson, writes as an answer to the above events: "It is unfortunate [...] that in important public discourse uninformed stereotypes of a BA in philosophy are thoughtlessly repeated." (Richardson, 2014, p. 1) It is our hope that this study can encourage and inspire others to seek out the relevance and importance of philosophical inquiry, especially in an increasingly market-driven educational context, and show the practical importance of philosophy to society and human life.

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