

## “The best thing about philosophy is that there’s no right or wrong answer.”

You hear this slogan in praise of P4C from both adults and children. It’s a very liberating idea that provides a bold contrast to traditional schooling. But I’d like to suggest that it should be marked “handle with care”, and that it is worth doing some philosophy on this claim about philosophy. The questions in italics are ones that can shape thinking during many enquiries.

*Does it make sense?* If there are no right or wrong answers in philosophy (NROWA for short), mustn’t there be at least *one* right answer – that there are no right or wrong answers? In which case there *aren’t* no right or wrong answers!

*Does it go too far?* Universal statements about the whole of philosophy or “all x’s”, “no y’s” require stronger proof than more modest claims such as “most...” or “some...” That there are no right or wrong answers about *any* philosophical question at all is a very strong claim. If you include within an answer the reasons that support it, at least some answers will be wrong because they are based on false factual premises. The presence of a vegetarian in the room is sufficient evidence to disprove “it’s OK to eat animals because you cannot survive otherwise.”

*Does it say what we mean?* Just as an enquiry question can sometimes be a colourful code for a broader problem, NROWA can be a shorthand way of saying something else: all opinions will be listened to with respect, or that participants are not playing “snap” with the teacher’s authoritative answer. Or more philosophically, it can signify that answers are provisional and that openness to changing one’s mind is something to be valued.

*Is it a useful idea even if it isn’t true?* In chemistry, for example, teachers use the simplified model of electrons orbiting the nucleus of an atom in a series of “shells”. They know this isn’t true, but they teach it as a helpful approximation so that they can get on with other bits of chemistry without having to explore quantum mechanics.

NROWA is undoubtedly helpful in motivating both pupils and teachers, in particular in encouraging participants to shed their inhibitions and stop looking to an authority figure for an answer. But there are outcome-focused teachers and pupils for whom it is a

turn-off as well: if I know there’s no right or wrong answer before we start, what’s the point of the discussion? Should we at least let pupils know we’re using an approximation?

*Which questions have answers, but ones which we can’t know?* Reflecting on the limits of our knowledge, present and potential, is a paradigmatic philosophical activity. Though it may be out of reach, there is a right answer to the question “Does God exist?”

*If it’s true, what then?* I struggle to see how NROWA can be separated from NROW – that there’s no right or wrong. That a belief has unpalatable consequences doesn’t mean it’s not true, but it demands scrutiny.

A facebook group was set up by supporters of Raoul Moat, who shot three people, one fatally, evaded capture for a week and finally turned his gun on himself. Its forum became an expletive-laden confrontation over the question of whether he was a hero or a villain. The majority of contributors to the forum were there to protest the very existence of the group, but perhaps 5%- 10% saw Moat as a hero for his “resistance” to the police. Then there were subscribers to a third point of view, of which this was the most succinct expression:

i aint sticking up for any one but all im gunna say is no one can judge anyone and every one is intitled to there opinion

This is a runaway “lethal mutation” of liberal and democratic values. It’s wrong to judge people on their gender, race or sexuality, so it’s wrong to judge people on anything at all (except if they judge people, in which case be as judgemental as you like); everyone is entitled to an opinion and everyone is equal, so all opinions are equal (except the opinion that your opinion is more reasonable than someone else’s – who do you think you are?).

The facebook contributor may have thought that she was being eminently reasonable precisely because she was holding the middle ground and suspending judgement – being a peacemaker, respecting the views of all the others in the forum. This is what NROWA looks like when applied to an extreme case. What’s missing from her thinking, and from NROWA

taken in isolation, is any notion that opinions can be held accountable to reason.

Not that NROWA is intended to be taken in isolation, but that's what happens to the most easily remembered aspects of ideas in education. The phrase "lethal mutation" is from research into how innovations are distorted as they spread.

Without adherence to first principles of learning, surface procedures tend to be adopted, adapted and ritualized in such a way that they cease to serve the "thinking" function they were designed to foster... Some modifications so far depart from the original philosophy that they can be termed "lethal mutations."<sup>1</sup>

I take a core part of P4Cs original philosophy to be "to bring about the transformation of persons into more reasonable individuals committed to the creation of a reasonable world."<sup>2</sup> NROWA does not seem to take enquiry that seriously, but instead contributes to the spread of our own lethal mutation, as voiced by a deputy head: "Ah yes, we do P4C. It's basically a way to get them talking, isn't it?"

Given that P4C is bound to be known to many by a small number soundbites, it is easy to see why NROWA is one of them. It contrasts boldly with typical classroom practice; it plays to the creative, caring and collaborative sides of P4C which are the "easier sell"; and it's memorable and inviting.

I'd like to put in a plea for a change in the language we use. "In philosophy, there's no right or wrong answer" for me says kick back, relax, it doesn't matter what you say. It puts participants on an equal footing through a "beggar my neighbour" policy: your thoughts are just as important as the teacher's thoughts because he doesn't have a clue either.

By contrast, "In philosophy, anyone might have the answer" says get involved, we're on a quest for something here. You are worth listening to because you might have the thought all of us need to hear, and it's worth listening to others because you never know who else might have it. It promotes openness to new ideas but intimates that some answers are more reasonable than others and that progress is possible.

Above all, it implies that P4C is not just a way to get them talking. If that's what you're after, release a snake in assembly. They'll be talking about it for months.

*A 2009 survey of Canadian teens, reported in the August 14, 2009 edition of The Vancouver Sun., xix disclosed that 64% of Canadian teens agreed with the statement that "what's right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion." To those who do not cringe at this monstrous misguided pseudo-democratic relativist assumption, I challenge you to de-horrrify for the rest of us such decisions as the one made in 1997 by David Cash, a Berkeley University engineering student, who chose to turn the other way as his friend raped and then drowned a 7 year old girl, and who then proudly proclaimed that what his friend did had nothing to do with him and that it was not his place to judge.*

from Susan Gardner, "Putting Kids in Charge", presented at the 2010 NAACI conference and available at [www.naaci.org.uk](http://www.naaci.org.uk)

1 "Lethal mutation" is a phrase coined in this context by E.H Haertel. Quotation from Brown AL and Campione JC (1996) "Psychological theory and the design of innovative learning environments: on procedures, principles and systems".

2 Ann Sharp, The Ethics of Translation (1993), quoted in the SAPERE Level 1 Handbook pg 16