

51st Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Conference
University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
6–9 December 2023

Abstract

The 'Philosophy and Ethics' ATAR elective became part of the Western Australian curriculum in 2008, following a four-year development process involving the Philosophy and Ethics Reference Group, which included members of the WA Curriculum Council (now the School Curriculum and Standards Authority), the WA Association for Philosophy in Schools (APIS), as well as representatives of schools, vocational training organisations, and universities. My research has investigated the influences on the design and implementation of the course, the implications of those influences, and possible alternative forms that the course could take. I claim that the two primary influences were the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement that spread from America to Australia in the 1980s, and the outcomes-based model of education (OBE) that was being trialled in WA at the time the course was being developed. I further claim that these primary influences are best understood in the context of two other factors: the broader background of twentieth-century education reform in Western Australia, and the dominant 'analytic' culture of Australian academic philosophy. Finally, I claim that this combination of influences resulted in a course that overemphasises development and assessment of argument skills at the expense of learning philosophical content and intellectual history. This has two significant implications. First, it promotes a 'thin' conception of philosophy that fails to do justice to the richness of the Western philosophical tradition. Second, it perpetuates pedagogically questionable assumptions about the teaching and learning of thinking skills. I conclude by suggesting that both of these problems could be overcome if the course were redesigned along the following lines. First, the content should include a historical dimension in addition to the thematic and thinking-skills components. Second, some content knowledge should be assessed directly through essay writing. Both of these changes would likely have implications for teacher selection.

Simon Kidd
PhD Candidate
University of Western Australia