

## **SOCRATIC CIRCLES AS A LEARNING STRATEGY IN VALUES EDUCATION AND INTERFAITH AND INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**

### **Introduction**

This paper gives an account of the work of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster, undertaken in association with the Values Education Good School Practice Project, sponsored by the Australian Commonwealth Government between the years 2006-2008. In particular this paper examines the use of Socratic Circles as a teaching and learning strategy for values education and interfaith and intercultural understanding.

The Australian Commonwealth Government's Values Framework identified nine values for Australian schooling: Integrity; Freedom; Responsibility; Respect; Doing your Best; Honesty and Trustworthiness; Fair Go; Care and Compassion; Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion.

The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (VEGPSP) involved twenty-six clusters of schools attempting to identify good practice regarding whole school approaches to implementing values education. The government's policy of funding these efforts on the basis of self selected clusters was intended to establish an interdependent and self supporting environment for the schools to undertake the project. Underpinning this national reform initiative was the concern of the Australian Government to improve values education programs in Australian schools. The initiative was also an exercise in community building as schools engaged their communities to consider values and values education and to collectively support their integration into Australian society and culture. Collaborative clusters were a fundamental part of the strategy for implementing this reform initiative.

Involvement in the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project involved two main things for each cluster of schools: 1) devising successful

ways of implementing the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*; and 2) conducting some research on the project as it developed. The purpose of the research was to identify, substantiate and describe good practices in values education so they could be shared with all schools in Australia. A collaborative, Action Research model was developed to undertake this research. The Action Research model was not designed to be an exercise of doing research "on teachers and schools", but rather one of researching with the teachers and the schools in ways that would continuously inform the project at hand. Each cluster co-ordinator worked with an academic colleague(s) as a "critical friend" helping the cluster with their Action Research activities. This paper draws on the reflections of the cluster co-ordinator and the two "critical friends" engaged in this project.

### **The Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster**

In June 2006 the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster was formed, comprising five schools: St. Monica's College, Epping, a Catholic coeducational school; The Australian International Academy, Coburg, an Independent Islamic coeducational school; The King David School, Armadale, an Independent Jewish coeducational school; Thornbury High School, Thornbury, a Government High School; and Siena College, Camberwell, a Catholic Girls' School. The main objective of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster was to provide opportunities for young people from different schools, cultures and faith traditions to come together and discuss issues of values, beliefs, and identity particularly around the themes of understanding and social inclusion. The initial purpose of the cluster's work came out of a desire to respond to some of the

disturbing and negative activities and attitudes evident in the Australian community, especially the Cronulla riots in 2005. It was hoped that the work of the cluster could contribute to fostering positive relationships among young people of different cultures and faiths and in so doing contribute to a stronger sense of community and social cohesion among the students and within society more broadly. The work of the cluster was not to study different religions per se, rather the aim was to provide opportunities for interaction among students from different cultural and faith traditions, so that they could dialogue around important, relevant and significant issues in their lives and in society.

### **Socratic Circles as a Learning and Teaching Strategy**

The chosen framework for student learning and interaction in the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster was Socratic Circles. Socratic Circles is an innovative method of disciplined conversation which restructures the way learners discuss issues. Socratic Circles promotes dialogue in a non-adversarial manner creating an environment designed for social learning and personal development. Inherent in the methodology of Socratic Circles is the value of respect.

Specifically, the methodology of Socratic Circles focuses on a rigorous examination of important issues through shared inquiry. The emphasis is on participants working towards shared understanding through active listening, sharing of ideas and questions in response to the contributions of others, and a search for evidence to support their ideas. Participants are encouraged to listen, to make meaning, and to find common ground through dialogue. This dialogue expands and possibly changes a participant's point of view and generates openness. There is an acceptance that each member of the group contributes their own interpretation of an issue or idea and that collaboration can lead to greater understanding. Participants search for strengths in all positions and seek not to alienate or offend. This was one of the major reasons that Socratic Circles were deemed to be a most appropriate tool for this interfaith and intercultural activity.

The Socratic Circle model allows students to examine in detail a text of some sort. The text may be a poem, a newspaper article, a scene from a movie, a poster, artwork, an object etc. In the work of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster students were given one or more texts as

part of their preparation for the Socratic Circle discussion. They were given time to think about the significance of the text and 'read' the text critically. They were taught to attend to the text by highlighting significant words, phrases, and parts of the text. They were encouraged to take notes on the text and use these when they were speaking in the inner circle of the Socratic Circle.

Students in The Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster were organized into two circles- an inner circle which engaged in discussion on the texts and an outer circle whose members observed and then made comment on the nature and substance of the discussion of the inner circle. These groups were then rotated so that students had the opportunity to engage in all aspects of the process.

The process was not as confronting as some classroom discussions can be, because students had the chance to prepare responses. Throughout the process, students were taught how to formulate questions because this is a key component of the inner circle discussions. We found that students were more experienced in answering questions than asking them, but the formulation of questions is a crucial skill in the development of dialogue and an important part of the learning process.

In the outer circle students learned how to observe critically. Students were taught what to look and listen for and were guided in their delivery of feedback. Students were given 'sentence starters' to help them give specific, relevant, constructive and non-personal feedback. This outer circle dynamic was a hallmark of the Socratic Circle method as practiced by the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster and added considerable power to the learning experience.

Socratic Circles is a discussion type inspired by the Theory of Knowledge developed by the Greek philosopher Socrates. Socrates believed that students could improve their reasoning skills and ultimately move toward more rational thinking and ideas more easily supported with logic. Matt Copeland, an American Literature teacher, developed a contemporary translation of this theory for use with adolescents in his text, *Socratic Circles: Fostering critical and creative thinking in middle and high school* [Copeland, 2005]. The work of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster was informed by this work.

Copeland (2005) argues that the changing nature of communication, being reliant heavily on new

technologies and the changing nature of the workplace, and continuing to be less about the manipulation of raw materials and more about the distillation of ideas, means that young learners need to be better communicators than ever before. The corresponding responsibility of educators is to equip students with the requisite skills to source information, read critically that information and consider individually and in groups the significance of that material to their learning.

Traditional classroom discussion does not always involve the greatest number of learners to the best effect for learning. Most traditional classroom discussions lack clear expectations for participation. They lack a process or framework for involvement. Students can sit back and 'let' either the teacher and/or a few keen students to do all the work. The Socratic Circle method of text analysis and discussion has been shown to improve students' ability to: listen attentively; speak clearly; write logical arguments; think in a more reasoned manner and interact positively with others in a group setting [Copeland, 2005, p25]. This discussion method supports students to: build interpretive skills; make more meaningful connections between different but related texts; contribute specific comments based on prepared critical reading; accept different interpretations; use direct references and quotes from texts; and support valid and interesting contributions of peers.

Students prepare for the discussion lessons by critically reading a section of the text and taking detailed notes in response to specific questions. They are also expected to develop questions they can ask of their peers to better discern the meaning of the text. After this preparation students are ready to participate in a more in-depth discussion with others. Two circles are created in the middle of the room engaging all students in a discussion. Students face one another participating in and observing formal conversation. Students also record their observations of other students' participation and shared their feedback with the group. The key to feedback is specificity and students learn to pinpoint the positives of a particular person's contribution as well as offering some constructive ideas about how to improve their participation.

### **Learning Activities of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster**

Learning activities of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster were planned with imagination and creativity. The first interschool gathering

which took place at The King David School, provides evidence of the importance attached to intelligence, creativity and fun in the design of learning activities. The gathering was scheduled to coincide with Purim, an important Jewish festival. Twelve students from each of the different schools involved in the cluster came to King David School and they watched a performance about Purim. They learnt about the importance and significance of that festival in the Jewish tradition. They also engaged in small groups discussing topics such as: Does racism exist in our community? How do we combat stereotypes about particular cultural and religious groups? How as young people do we combat racism in the community? These small group discussions served as a precursor to the Socratic circle dialogue that then took place.

Twenty students participated in the Socratic Circle. The students who were participating in the Socratic circle were given a media file prior to their engagement in the Socratic dialogue. The media file provided an opportunity for students to review articles, annotate those articles, and generally become informed and ready to discuss issues around values, most explicitly understanding, tolerance and inclusion. The discussion was videotaped because part of the aim of this project was to collect evidence of the nature and quality of conversations among students so that some evaluation could be made about the depth with which the students were tackling these issues over time.

A second interschool gathering took place at the Melbourne Immigration Museum. After participating in the Koorie Heritage Walk along the Yarra River, guided by Koorie Educators, students toured many exhibits at the Melbourne Immigration Museum. Students then conducted Socratic Circles with a focus on the themes of place, memory, story and journey. They considered the contrast between the counter-productivity of attempting to enforce assimilation onto migrants and the benefits to the whole community of encouraging and supporting integration. Students understood the concept of displacement and some made links between their own family's experience of displacement and the Australian Aboriginal experience of loss of culture, language and homeland. This experience was a lesson in empathy and students responded well to the opportunity for reflection.

The third interschool gathering which took place at Siena College at the beginning of August 2007

adopted a focus on intercultural understanding as portrayed through visual arts. The attending students were assembled into fifteen groups of five, each of which was provided with a resource package consisting of an artwork, a poem and lyrics to a song. These resource packages had been assembled by the cluster staff. Working in their Socratic circles, the students started by responding to the various stimuli presented to them, and discussed them in light of contemporary local and international issues. It should be noted that the element of personal experience began to be introduced by the students into their conversations, signifying a build up of trust amongst the students from the different school groups. Cluster staff acted as facilitators of the day and worked only on the periphery of the groups, not amongst them. This allowed for student leadership roles to emerge (roles that were clearly evident in the fourth cluster meeting) and for students to create within an uninhibited and honest environment. The groups were given access to a wide range of artists' materials – canvas, paints, collage, montage, inks, texture – and in the period before and directly after lunch, their thoughts and discoveries that stemmed from the Socratic circles were transformed into visual representations. A majority worked in and with their group, collaborating together and a few individuals worked separately, bringing their works together at the end. As the groups worked, a small cohort of Siena students rehearsed a keyboard version of John Lennon's 'Imagine', which had been one of the chosen song lyrics. The day concluded with the exhibiting of the works of art and a brief narration from the group members.

The students were eloquent in their explanations of their art work and their interpretations of the resources were original and succinct. A real success of the day was observing how the students from the different schools had begun to make connections – burgeoning close friendships were evident as was a sincere interest in the success of the day. In one of the activities students and staff were invited to add foliage to a tree by painting their hands and printing on a large canvas. As each member of the cluster added their prints to the branches of the tree, an impressive and powerful symbol of the understanding and diversity within the room was created. Some of the art work emanating from the gathering was exhibited at the Australian Catholic University Gallery in Brunswick St Fitzroy in December 2007.

The fourth interschool gathering took place at St Monica's in October. The inspiration for the day's activities was the spirit of a treasured object and a

journey. Cluster staff launched the day by speaking to the students about a treasured personal possession, reiterating the connections to lives past and present, and also to the importance of celebrating family and friendship. These treasures which staff spoke about to students included a Burmese blanket, bequeathed gold cufflinks and a handmade Chaplet of St Chiara. In addition to staff, each student had been asked to bring a treasured possession to the cluster day with them and these provided the source for the first discussion of the day. These conversations took place in small inter-school groups, with students recounting stories of "THE JOURNEY"- including themes of immigration, settlement, family, escape and new beginnings.

Building on the creativity of the Siena cluster day, the aim of the fourth cluster day was for each group to produce a short dramatization of a story or composite of stories. The sports hall at St Monica's provided the venue with ample rehearsal space and a large stage. The message within the students' understanding and representation of the stories was the focus, so props and backdrops were not needed. The dramatizations were deeply heartfelt and this heightened their power. Many of the short plays found inspiration in the stories of the students families and their journey from their homelands to Australia. The depth of maturity, understanding, empathy and compassion shown by each student as they performed stories of their own family's journeys or the families of others in their group is perhaps evidence of their learning and development gained as a result of participation in this cluster project. The official program of the day concluded with a performance of the song "Bridge Over Troubled Waters".

The culmination of eighteen months worth of explorative and innovative student based learning was successfully showcased on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2008 at the Melbourne Exhibition and Conference Centre. With an audience of Victorian secondary and primary students, the cluster members hosted a day that reflected the essence of the Melbourne Interfaith & Intercultural Cluster – understanding, respect, reflection, and learning. A panel of community representatives started the conference by discussing the contemporary topic 'What does it mean to be an Australian and what makes a good Australian citizen?' The remainder of the day was led by the students involved in the project. Key elements of the day included a dramatisation entitled 'Story of Journey', an on-stage demonstration of a Socratic Circle and an art exhibition in the foyer. The success of this day was

testament to the hard work and commitment of the students and to the guidance and enthusiasm of the project facilitators. The confidence, maturity and strength with which the students performed and participated in the day was infectious, and more importantly, it was authentic. Those who have witnessed these students' journey all have a common observation – a deep and lifelong understanding and respect has been nurtured in this small pocket of Australian youth. Furthermore it is the youth of this country that has the power to enable change and promote dialogue among different religious and cultural groups in the future.

### **Socratic Circles and the Work of the Cluster: Some Reflections and Learnings**

The choice of Socratic Circles as the framework for student interaction in the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster provided an innovative and appropriate structure for disciplined conversation around: values and beliefs, religious commitments, and philosophy. Socratic Circles endorse the principle that, 'All teachers are teachers of values'. It was found that this method creates an environment that encourages and supports: equitable participation, freedom of expression of ideas, in-depth exploration of issues and positive feedback and evaluation.

In the work of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster the choice and organization of stimulus material was congruent with the themes of: values, culture, beliefs and understanding. The distribution of stimulus material to students happened prior to the gatherings because students needed time to prepare for the Socratic Circles by reading the texts critically. Teachers compiled mediating questions to begin inner circle discussions. This preparation was an essential element of the learning process, particularly in the beginning stages of the life of the cluster.

Interschool gatherings were organized taking into consideration customs/festivals and prayer rituals of the religious traditions of those students involved in the cluster. The Interfaith and intercultural dialogue brought together individuals from diverse backgrounds to examine and question points of similarity and difference in relation to distinct and shared culture, beliefs and traditions. The project has been a positive response to a societal need to build community relationships characterized by peace and respect.

The principles of good group collaboration were evident in the work of the cluster and included the

elements of: respect; responsibility; freedom and inclusion. The inclusion of a creative element through artwork, drama, music, poetry and prose enhanced student engagement. The Siena day when art and creativity was at the forefront of student activity was in many ways a turning point in student engagement and collaborations. Creativity was found to be at the heart of student learning.

The observable impact of the cluster's work on student development and learning included elements of the following:

- relationship building
- independent learning
- communicative competence
- intellectual depth
- creative expression

Through the process of Socratic Circle dialogue, students have become more aware of their ideas and opinions in relation to others. The structure of the discussion gave students the freedom to explore issues with others and express their own opinion in a safe learning environment. Respect for self, others and the learning process, is the cornerstone of this engagement. The preliminary exercises, in 'giving feedback', guided the quality and effectiveness of constructive criticism.

In schooling today, most interactions between schools are of a competitive nature – 'Who won the football, debating, music competition – what was the *score*?' However, in this project we saw students learning to collaborate with others from different cultural and/or faith backgrounds for the purpose of advancing both self-awareness and identity and deepening an understanding of others.

The Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster brought together students from a diverse range of religious and cultural backgrounds. Students were able to represent their own beliefs within the complementary framework for discussion of Socratic Circles. They explored the nature of values and beliefs and collaborated to assert common aspirations for a respectful and understanding community.

The work of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster has demonstrated that the Socratic Circle method is well designed to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment among diverse student groups. Students are educated about how to give feedback, how to start a sentence when giving feedback, how feedback

needs to be specific, that feedback must not be personal. Students learn that feedback needs to have some constructive element to it and that in giving positive feedback it is important to give some feedback about areas for improvement and some direction. When such feedback comes from students' peers, rather than teachers, it appears to be particularly effective.

Socratic Circles provided an opportunity to "objectify conflict" in a supportive learning environment. One of the advantages of Socratic Circles is that it gives student support and direction when discussing potentially difficult and contentious issues. There is safety in the structure of the Socratic circle. Students know their roles, they have had an opportunity to read material from the media file; they are not being asked questions they haven't seen before, or asked about things they haven't had a chance to think about before.

Socratic Circles changes the dynamic between teachers and students. The role of the teacher is to be there, listening, but not jumping in. As one teacher comments: "The teacher or mediator steps back and students know they are stepping back, there's no hands up, there's just a conversation. It is not a matter of going around the circle and saying what is written on our sheet, but let's listen and respond to what we hear, and if there's silence don't freak out about silence, learn what to do with a silence, it's all learning about communication.... even the shy student, the reluctant student, is supported in this framework, and gets the immediate feedback, and has a chance to prepare what they will say."

The Socratic Circle method does not require a great deal of preparation on the part of teachers. There are some pre-prepared sheets that teachers can circulate to students to enable systematic observation and the text that the students can discuss can be as brief as a paragraph long. The text can be an advertisement from the television, it can be a poster, it can be a health promotion, it can be an object. One teacher comments, "it doesn't take a lot to prepare for such a discussion but the great thing about Socratic circles is it really does subvert the traditional physical space in the classroom and the relationship between teacher and student, and in that subversion, the good subversion, teachers think about "...What have I been doing? For how long have I been doing it? Why do I do this?". Socratic Circles as a method can prompt teachers to question how they can improve, and "that's what quality teaching is

about, revising what you do, picking up on new ideas, being open to other people's ideas and methods, and pedagogy, and then trialling that, and if it doesn't work so well, trying it again, and again, and again".

Interfaith and intercultural issues have been central to the work of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster both within and between the schools. The whole project was about talking about issues that relate to all students, bringing forward their different perspectives and different stories. Memories were an important part of the conversation. Memory was a key part of the inter-school gathering at the Melbourne Immigration Museum, for example, where consideration was given to: What part does memory play in identity and the memories of our parents, and their stories, and the stories about place and about movement? How does that form identity? What is the best way to deal with memory so that it can energise us, not create division and tension? One school created a Heritage Tree where staff and students write their family name on one side of a paper gum leaf, and on the other side they write their heritage countries. A teacher comments: "Gum leaves are significant because when indigenous people welcome others to country they give gum leaves, so there's that Australianess about the tree. But the Heritage Tree also acknowledges that Australia is made up of people from different backgrounds and countries, so we are accepting diversity, celebrating diversity, whilst also acknowledging that we need to be cohesive and we need to work together, and that doesn't mean relinquishing ties with culture but it means recognising the shared culture."

### **A Final Word From the Students**

Words from the students involved in the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster highlight the learning gains associated with the use of Socratic Circles in interfaith and intercultural understanding:

*"The Socratic Circles gave the students a chance to speak together and share their interests as well as have a chance to express their feelings about their beliefs and about the topic being discussed. All the students from the schools then had the opportunity to be involved in celebrations with the Jewish festival 'Purim'. I believed the day turned out great and was heaps of fun." (King David School)*

*"I learnt a lot today. I learnt about the negative stereotypes Christians feel and the different*

*beliefs/events that Jews believe in. I also got to find out the different ways people want to combat racism, what people see as Australian values. I also learnt a lot about how we should see individuals not groups of people.” ( Australian International Academy)*

*“I thought the Muslim girls would be very strict and serious, but they were laughing and talking – they were great. I just loved them!” ( St Monica’s College)*

*“Our Aboriginal journey around the Yarra River was very informing and interesting and gave us time to get to know the students from various schools of various faiths in an open and comfortable environment. The Socratic circles gave us a chance to discuss topics of our choice ranging from asking questions about racism and the way the government handles it to learning and asking questions about other religions. As a whole the day was a great learning experience as well as a chance to make new friends. (King David School)*

*“The highlight of this experience for me was being able to interact with people from different faiths and backgrounds and cultures. The Socratic Circles that I have been apart of have allowed me to voice my opinions in a non-threatening environment. And it was also interesting to hear other people’s views.” [ Siena College]*

*“Everyone has very different music tastes. And that even though we may be different religions, we*

*still have the same common values.” [ Australian International Academy]*

*“I learnt we all think alike and although our exteriors and backgrounds are different we are one in the same.” [ Thornbury High School]*

*“Today, I enjoyed meeting my friends from other schools the most, the acting was also interesting. But generally, the different forms of art and the interaction with new people is a really great thing for me.” [ Thornbury High School]*

*“I have learnt interesting aspects of other religions.” [ St Monica’s College]*

*“People with different religions really have the same values as us. I learnt a lot of interesting facts about other religions.” [ St Monica’s College]*

The Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural cluster has successfully shown how the Socratic Circle method can be employed in learning and teaching about values and intercultural and interfaith understanding. The work of the cluster has been major innovation in Australian education and presents as a model for inter-sectoral co-operation and learning in the future.

## REFERENCES

Copeland, M. (2005). *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse.

\*Catherine Devine from St Monica’s College was Co-ordinator of the Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster;

\*Prof Judith Chapman and \*Adam Staples of Australian Catholic University served as “critical friends” to the cluster.