



LEADING TEACHING AND LEARNING MICHELLE HAINES THOMAS

Student led philosophy in the classroom

Michelle Haines Thomas describes how two students at Arden Anglican School found a way to make ethics and philosophy wildly popular among their peers, thanks to some out-of-the-box thinking and a supportive environment.

ON KAI MACANN'S first day of Year 7 at Arden Anglican School, he started chatting with his Christian Studies teacher, Catherine Bradshaw. As a bright 11-year-old full of questions and ideas, he wanted to engage in ethical and philosophical discussions, and he had finally found a willing sparring partner.

They started meeting at lunchtimes and, over the course of some years, more and more people joined them. The first of these was his classmate, Daniel Mawston. The pair had become friends thanks to alphabetised seating arrangements in science class, and Daniel became intrigued by Kai's reports of the conversations.

But in 2020, events overtook them. Against a background of COVID-19 and race riots in the US, an attempt to work through an applied ethics module in what had become a lunchtime philosophy club – known as Symposium, after the ancient Greeks – was thwarted by lockdowns.

"I was quite glad because I had no idea how I was going to do it – I thought it was going to be too dry and boring," recalled Kai. "So Daniel and I started talking about how there has to be a way to make discussing all these things that we were seeing more engaging, but also more accessible...There must be a way to pitch it at the level of a high school student, especially a Year 7 student."

The first version of what was to become their award-winning, interactive, web-based game, known as Terra Symposium, was a deck of ethics problem cards. "We thought it would be cool to have some structure around it," explained Daniel, "and then it was a board game, and then a table-top game, and around six iterations later, and a lot of programming later, we have what we have now."



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What they have now is a repository of problem cards, multiple modules, and different topics for different ages of students. They are currently preparing the web application that will host the game when they take it out into the world next year.

The game itself posits the governments of two countries, made up of players, who must encounter and solve real-world style issues that can run the gamut from military or environmental threats to social or economic unrest. Solutions are weighted by the likely satisfaction of the hypothetical population. Excitement builds as players see the results of their decisions reflected in numerical form.

Kai and Daniel are now in Year 12, working on Terra Symposium's development around their HSC studies. They are planning for a 2024 that will see them run the game as a seminar in a number of other schools already lining up for the privilege.

The reception to the game has been close to rapturous, with the young men receiving a particular boost after winning the People's Choice Award at the Australian Information Industry Association 2022 iAwards late last year.

Arden Principal, Justin Beckett, has backed the two young men to the hilt. "Kai and Daniel are two of the most innovative people I've met," enthused Mr Beckett. "They are highly creative and have found a project that students are genuinely excited about. They treat the students with such respect, as they expect them to be able to think critically about complex world problems...and the students rise to it."

He said Arden has done all it can to support them, from initially encouraging young Kai's inquiring mind in Year 7, to championing the pair's increasingly popular lunchtime gatherings.

"Actually, all I've done is just say yes to all their ideas," laughs Mr Beckett. "My role is to enable them."

Sam Hwang, Arden's current Head of Christian Studies, took over supervision of lunchtime symposiums and has been impressed by the way students respond to the philosophical and ethical concepts in the game. "I think what they've done is absolutely brilliant!" he says. "The game takes abstract ideas and puts them in a context where the ideas have consequences, which is similar to the real world, so they have to think through the effects. Because it's a simulation, it develops and changes and grows. Because players are interacting with others who might not be on the same page – they have to work things through to find agreement."

He compares it to the game Risk, but without the element of chance brought by dice. Rev. Hwang says, "(The game) is all about ideas, so it's a lot more complex, and Arden is a place that nurtures kids who are excited about ideas."

Kai and Daniel cite research¹ that shows there is a clear need for philosophical enquiry in the classroom, saying it fosters a better classroom environment, helps tie theoretical concepts together that students might be struggling to grasp, and allows the classroom to collaborate in a unique way.

"The problem is that most teachers aren't trained in how to use these philosophical enquiry models, and most schools see it as a luxury they can ill-afford – to be talking about philosophy when they need to be hitting the syllabus exactly,"

explained Kai. "We try to create content that slots right into those subjects and those syllabus points, to become a supplement to that, not something that fights against the flow."

Pointing out that most children are inherently philosophical and curious, asking 'why?' from an early age, the pair note that many schools can't accommodate wide-ranging questioning, and leave philosophy only to the most elite of students.

Ultimately, Kai and Daniel would like to see ethics and philosophy take their place in the school system as a crucial component in developing well-rounded graduates.

"Teaching philosophy builds upon the whole 'global citizenship' idea that a lot of schools advocate, building a student who's socially conscious and emotionally mature," Daniel pointed out.

They hope that Terra Symposium will become a potential cornerstone of philosophy education.

"Students don't learn from solutions; they learn from problems," said Kai. "We try to give them all these problem cards that could very well be something they see in the real world – past, present or future – and they have to use all the things they're learning from their subjects to try to expose problems as a group, as a government, to make their civilisation a bit better."

"It's about being able to face all these challenging real-world problems in the safety of a classroom." ■

Arden Anglican School is an Anglican co-educational early learning, primary and secondary day school located in Beecroft and Epping, neighbouring suburbs on the North Shore of Sydney. Go to terrasymposium.com to find out more.

¹ Leng, L., 2020, The Role of Philosophical Inquiry in Helping Students Engage in Learning, *Frontiers in Psychology* V11, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00449>