



Philosophy Circle Pilot Program - Guest Lecture

This year, Loreto Normanhurst is engaging in a Philosophy Circle Pilot Program which will run fortnightly from Term 1, Week 7. This program comes after deep research in 2020 on the benefits of “doing philosophy.” As summed up by the German philosopher, Leonard Nelson, “effective philosophy teaching is the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophising, the art not of teaching about philosophers but of making philosophers of the students.”

There is extensive research on the value of students engaging with philosophical thinking. A small snapshot of some of this research is outlined below:

- International research findings on the effectiveness of philosophy in schools indicate marked cognitive and social benefits (Millett and Tapper, 2011).
- An analysis of 18 studies by Garcia-Moriyon, Robell and Colom (2005) concluded that “the implementation of P4C (Philosophy for Children) led to an improvement in students’ reasoning skills of more than half a standard deviation” (p.19).
- Topping and Trickey’s studies concluded that the practice of collaborative philosophical inquiry produces increases in measured IQ, sustained cognitive benefits, and clear performance gains in other school studies (Trickey and Topping, 2004, 2006, 2007).
- Empirical research in Australia has shown the potential for collaborative philosophical inquiry to foster pedagogical transformation (Scholl, Nichols and Burgh, 2008, 2009, 2014).

On Wednesday, March 10, the small groups selected to be part of the Philosophy Circle Pilot Program from Years 6, 8, 10 and 12, and some staff were able to attend a guest lecture by Dr Xavier Symons of the Australian Catholic University. Dr Symons has written for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian Financial Review* and is a regular on ABC radio. He has degrees from the University of Sydney, Oxford University, and the Australian Catholic University where he is now a postdoctoral research fellow at the Plunkett Centre for Ethics. In 2020, he won the Fulbright scholarship for his postdoctoral work in bioethics and was set to study at Georgetown University throughout 2021. This was postponed because of COVID concerns, so we were very fortunate to be able to acquire his expertise for this launch. You can [read more about Dr Symons here](#).

Dr Symons spoke to us about his life as a philosopher and bioethicist, especially his work during the COVID-19 pandemic at St. Vincent’s Hospital. He provided some fascinating insights into the ethical questions COVID-19 has raised for doctors and other health professionals and the role he undertakes in providing ethical guidance on issues such as ventilator use, general treatment of COVID-19 patients and the vaccine roll-out at St. Vincent’s Hospital. He also spoke about the valuing of philosophy in the world of Classical Greece through the story of Socrates, as well as the impact of feminist philosophy through the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt. Dr Symons spoke



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passionately on the value of engaging with philosophical thinking and the importance of engaging with multiple perspectives when coming to conclusions on complex issues.

Both staff and students were highly engaged by this conversation and directed some well-considered and profound questions to Dr Symons during the Q+A at the end of the session. Some questions asked by the girls included, “what do you do with perspectives that are offensive to others?” and “do you ever reach a crisis as a philosopher if something does not have an answer?”

Dr Symons was encouraged by the Pilot Program as well as other philosophy initiatives at Loreto Normanhurst such as the extra-curricular Philosophy Club and the Critical Thinking and Philosophy Course that is offered through Macquarie University to some Year 11 students. We hope to invite Dr Symons back at some point to be involved in our philosophy circles as the discussions begin to unfold each fortnight under group facilitators Mr Scali (Year 6), Mrs Dwyer (Year 8), Mrs Solo (Year 10) and Ms Ugonotti (Year 12).

Mr Marco Scali

Acting Knowledge and Learning Strategist