PLATO Philosophy Fund Application

*Thank you for Applying!*

*Project Title: \_\_Embodied Philosophy: Using Tools of Movement-Based Theater to Deepen Philosophical Engagement in Children*

*Dates for Project: \_\_\_Apr 15, 2019-Dec 1, 2019\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

*Amount of Funding Requested: \_\_\_\_$2100\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

**1. Please describe the project, including any work that has already been done to develop it.** (500 words max)

This project aims to bring together philosophy and movement-based theater. Philosophical thinking is often heavily discussion- and language-based. However, extensive discussion can be difficult for younger children, who may lose interest or who need physical movement to stay engaged. Given that children exhibit different modes of learning, our hope is that movement-based theater will make philosophy accessible to a wider group of youth and deepen their engagement with philosophy.

Our project aims to provide proof-of-concept, demonstrating that movement-based techniques can be incorporated into philosophical pedagogy. To do this, we will collaborate to develop several “philosophical theater” modules and deploy these with two groups of children.

The exact content of the modules will be developed during the grant period. In developing these modules, we will take two approaches.

* Approach #1: Start with a philosophical concept, and identify movement-based techniques to enhance understanding of it. That is, movement-based techniques will be used to engage the attention of children and deepen discussion on a topic of classic philosophical interest. For instance, a philosophical discussion of the nature of animal cognition might be paired with movement exercises where children practice embodying animals. Similarly, a philosophical idea such as happiness might be paired with an exercise where children embody happiness in different ways, and then reflect on their experiences.
* Approach #2: Start with a technique from movement-based theater or a scenario from a dramatic story, and identify philosophical ideas which would be appropriate to pair with it. For instance, if a theater program teaches young children movement techniques to embody a tree, this might lend itself to a discussion of environmental ethics. As another example, we might use a scenario from within a folk tale to ground a philosophical discussion, e.g. if a mythical spider has stolen someone’s food, children might describe and act out potential consequences—leading to a more general discussion of how consequences matter morally.

Specifically, the project aims to:

* Develop four 45-minute units integrating philosophy and tools of movement-based theater. This work would be done in the late Spring 2019, as a partnership between a philosopher and drama educator. These individuals have been identified and are willing to participate.
* Pilot these units with children 6-8 years old in the summer of 2019. These units would be incorporated into an existing program, the Summer Institute of Fun, hosted by Occidental College, which has agreed to partner with us. This program has been in existence since 2004, and provides scholarship for needy students. The program runs as a half-day weekly summer camp, and our units would be piloted for one week of the program.
* Revise and/or develop additional units, deploying them in the Fall of 2019 with 2nd and 3rd grade children at a Los Angeles elementary school. Philosophy faculty have already established an afterschool philosophy club at this school, making it easy to incorporate these units.
* Collect qualitative data on student and instructor responses to the modules.
* Distribute our modules, findings, and best practices. This can be done through scholarly publications, and also through organizations such as PLATO. In particular, because our focus is on movement-based techniques, we hope to use audio-visual recordings to share these pedagogical strategies.

**2. What is the purpose of this project?** (500 words max)

This project aims to bring together philosophy and movement-based theater, in order to extend the reach of philosophy to a wider range of youth and deepen discussion of philosophical ideas.

In the Fall of 2018, Occidental’s philosophy department began an afterschool club for 2nd and 3rd graders at a Los Angeles elementary school. At a typical meeting, students begin with an activity, discuss ideas in small groups and as a class, listen to a short story, and then discuss questions based on the story. For example, in one session, the lesson was focused on equitable distribution of resources. The children engaged in a variety of activities: sharing blocks, discussing a picture book, and deciding how to share a cake they had colored.

While most students were engaged with these lessons, some students struggled to “sit still,” especially during discussion periods. In addition, while more verbal students enjoyed sharing their ideas and listening to peers, this learning style simply didn’t work as well for some students. Our hope is that by introducing movement-based theatrical techniques into our philosophical teaching, we can make philosophy accessible to a wider range of students.

Making philosophy widely accessible is particularly important given that students who don’t “sit still” for philosophy have likely had similar struggles during the regular school day. Thus, these children may already be receiving, and internalizing, the message that they are “bad at school.” This raises the risk that, even though our work in philosophy is meant to encourage creativity and open-mindedness in young people, the heavy focus on verbalization and discussion sends the message to these children that they don’t have anything to contribute. (As one colleague put it to me, we don’t want our own pedagogy to become yet another site of oppression for these children.) It is important that philosophy be taught in a way that demonstrates to *all* children that they have ideas, and that their curiosity is valued. This requires developing pedagogical techniques that work for every kind of learner.

In addition to making philosophy more accessible, our hope is that the use of movement-based techniques will deepen philosophical reflection by children. That is, by engaging their bodies, children may find they have new and different things to say about the topic. For example, while embodying an animal, children might be asked to think about how an animal learns new things– and contrast this with how humans acquire knowledge. We anticipate that embodying these forms will lead students to think about these questions in different ways; they will think more deeply than they would in a traditional discussion setting.

Thus, to recapitulate, our immediate goal for this program is to develop a series of modules which will integrate philosophy and movement-based theater. Doing this will allow us to make philosophy more widely accessible and deepen philosophical reflection by children.

**3. Who will benefit from the project, and how?** (500 words max)

As mentioned above, we will develop these modules in collaboration across philosophy and theater, pilot these modules in a summer theater workshop, revise them, and then deploy them in at a Los Angeles elementary school in the Fall 2019.

This project will benefit a variety of stakeholders:

**Children at the summer theater workshop**. We will pilot our modules at Occidental’s Summer Institute of Fun. These children (ages 6-8) will be intentionally exposed to philosophy, something which they might otherwise not encounter in a theater workshop. They will benefit by being exposed to philosophical reflection: they will be asked to reflect on their experiences, to ask questions, and express curiosity.

**Children at a local elementary school.** After revisions, we will deploy our modules at an afterschool philosophy program with 2nd and 3rd graders. These children will benefit through the incorporation of movement-based techniques which will make philosophy more accessible to *all* students, and deepen their reflection. As mentioned above, it is particularly important to reach students who may struggle under traditional, discussion-based techniques. These students need a pedagogical method which will make reflection accessible to them.

It should be noted that the summer theater workshop and afterschool philosophy club are both ongoing endeavors. Therefore, we anticipate that the modules developed during this grant period, and the skills developed as philosophy and theater colleagues work together, will influence teaching and lesson plans in future years. That is, we hope that the work done during this grant period will have a spillover effect, leading to new and different pedagogical approaches for future cohorts of children at both sites.

**Occidental undergraduates.** The afterschool club is typically facilitated by Occidental undergraduates, who work under the stewardship of an Occidental philosophy professor. These students will benefit from seeing the value of interdisciplinary discussions, moving philosophy beyond traditional discussion-based approaches.

**Philosophy and theater faculty.** The grant will allow the development of an interdisciplinary relationship, planting the seeds for future collaboration.

**A broad community of philosophy educators.** By making our modules widely available, as well as our findings and best practices, we hope that other educators will adapt and utilize our techniques. In particular, because our focus is on movement-based techniques, we hope to use audio-visual recordings to share these pedagogical strategies with other philosophy educators.

**4. What is the plan for developing and implementing the project? Include a timeline.**

Mar 2019

* Submit human subjects paperwork, including forms to parents to allow any recording and/or interviewing of students/instructors about their experiences. (We will begin in March, presumably before receiving grant notification, in order to ensure timely approval of the project.)

April 2019

* Receive human subjects approval

May/June 2019

* Philosophy and theater begin meeting and develop modules
* Module drafts shared with additional theater and philosophy faculty for input

July

* Pilot modules for one week of Oxy summer theater workshop
* Obtain feedback from instructors and students; make audio/visual recordings as appropriate

August

* Revise and/or develop new modules

September/October

* Deploy modules at Los Angeles elementary school during after school philosophy club
* Obtain feedback from instructors and students; make audio/visual recordings as appropriate

November/December

* Write up modules, findings and best practices to share as a resource for other educators

**5. What other funding sources have you explored for this project?**

* The local PTA covers some of the costs associated with running the afterschool club, including paying for a credentialed teacher ($400), liability insurance (cost unknown), and overhead (cost unknown).
* The local PTA will pay for one instructor to teach the Fall afterschool club ($500). This will cover the cost of one philosophy faculty member, but will not pay for a second instructor from theater. Thus, we have requested PLATO to provide one $500 stipend for the Fall to cover the theater faculty member. We have also requested that PLATO provide a modest stipend ($250) for a philosophy faculty member for anticipated development time in the Fall. This stipend is intended to cover time specifically associated with this grant, e.g. redesigning modules, coordinating with theater, collecting and editing feedback from students/instructors, etc.

**6. Please list your budget, including any amounts from other sources.**

Budget:

Summer

* Stipends—philosophy & theater faculty—to develop and pilot modules: $500 per person x 2 people
* Stipends for additional faculty consultation (philosophy & theater): $100 per person x 2 people
* Miscellaneous purchases (manipulatives, name tags, etc.): $100

Summer subtotal: $1300

Fall

* Stipends to theater faculty to revise and deploy modules in the Fall ($500)
* Stipend to philosophy faculty will be in two parts. We are requesting a small stipend for grant-related work to revise and deploy modules ($250). In addition, the PTA will pay this faculty member $500 for other club-related work.
* Miscellaneous purchases (manipulatives, name tags, etc.): $50
* Stipend to credentialed teacher for oversight ($400 – paid by PTA)

Fall subtotal: $800

Total budget requested from PLATO: $2100