

Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

Epictetus in his *Discourses* (1.4) asks us to imagine inquiring about a bodybuilder's progress. We don't need to see the weights he has been using; it's his *muscles* that we're interested in. Likewise, if we want to know what progress a philosophy student has made, we should want to look at her character, not the books she has read. Because I agree with Epictetus, I adopt what Fink (2013) calls a "learner-centered paradigm": I begin by thinking about what positive changes I want to bring about in my students and design my courses around promoting those goals. These goals are: (a) acquainting students with fundamental concepts, debates, and people in the history of philosophy; (b) developing their skill in writing argumentative papers; and (c) eliciting interest in the subject matter, including recognition of, and appreciation for, philosophical questions.

Assignments

My teaching style and techniques continue to evolve as I become more experienced. I've learned that frequent, low-stakes quizzes help students consolidate what they have learned in their long-term memories (Brown et al. 2014, 28-42). Beginning the class with brief recaps of material covered in previous classes is beneficial for the same reason (Lowe 2016). I've also learned that people can reason more creatively when given some time to sit quietly and contemplate a question without any pressure (Claxton 1999, 146-161), so I'm considering setting aside a few minutes in future classes I teach for the same purpose.

For several years, I've assigned "philosophy conversations." Students must talk in person to someone they respect, don't know very well—I recommend a friend of a friend—and with whom they expect to disagree, about a topic discussed in class. Students write in advance about how they expect these discussions to go; in a later essay, they describe their conversations and compare the outcomes with their expectations. Students learn that it's possible to have constructive, respectful disagreements. Sometimes they even make new friends because of this assignment. That wasn't its pedagogical purpose, but it's a bonus I welcome.

Writing

Since I was a professional writer before I taught, it's been natural for me to put writing at the center of my pedagogy. I continue to think there are sound reasons for philosophy teachers to emphasize writing. Writing a good philosophy paper requires the student to develop and synthesize skills such

as understanding arguments, developing philosophical positions, and anticipating objections. Writing is also a skill that serves students well in other courses.

As I moved into a position with a heavier teaching load, I realized assigning a lot of writing wasn't always the most effective strategy to advance my goals. The appearance of AI programs such as Chat GPT, which can write passable student essays, created issues since cheating in this way can be hard to catch, especially with larger numbers of students. I've since decided it's wisest to cut back on the amount of writing I assign by allowing students to choose between a final exam and writing a persuasive essay. This new policy allows me the time to give targeted comments on the papers of those who are most interested in receiving it. I still assign the philosophy conversation paper to all students in introductory classes. I require them to complete it in stages, and I warn that I will use AI detection software and report everything suspicious to the honor council, to discourage the use of AI for cheating. I also allow students to use AI in the final round of revision, provided that they save the pre-AI drafts so that they can show me their work if I ask for it.

Classroom persona

I try to elicit interest in philosophy by following the simple advice of my undergraduate mentor, Jim Skidmore, who focuses on conveying his own interest in the subject matter. I've gradually lectured less and moved toward a format based on discussion and activities. For example, I use "Think-Pair-Share" exercises in which students first think about a question individually, then with a partner, and finally with the rest of the class. When I teach basic logic, which is always a component of my introductory classes, I put students in groups to do argument mapping exercises. One of the things I think I do especially well as a teacher is elicit a lot of high-quality participation. Several observers have commended the level of participation in my class.

Experience

I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity to teach a wide variety of philosophy courses to diverse bodies of students at three institutions: University of Colorado Boulder, Bowling Green State University, and Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. In addition, I was active in CU Boulder's Philosophy Outreach Program Colorado (POPCO), through which I made about a dozen trips to Colorado high schools and middle schools to talk about philosophy. I've also assisted with Ethics Bowl as both a coach and a judge. I look forward to teaching new classes and improving my teaching strategies.

References

Brown, Peter C., Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel (2014). *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Claxton, Guy (1999). *Wise Up: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Epictetus (1904). *Discourses*. Translated by George Long. New York: Appleton and Company.

Fink, L. Dee (2013). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, revised and updated edition.

Lowe, Dan (2016). "Remembrance of Philosophy Classes Past: Why Cognitive Science Suggests that a Brief Recap Is the Best Way to Start Each Class Day," *Teaching Philosophy*, 39 (3): 279–289.