

Teaching Philosophy

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First and foremost, I think of myself as an educator. As such, I am concerned especially with what it is to be educated. Correctly, I think, Canadian icon of literary criticism, Northrop Frye, said that to be educated in a field of knowledge means not having to have something explained to you in layman's terms. In other words, the need for translation marks the limits of one's education.

Philosophy, the subject I teach, is largely a textual discourse, and the philosophers who wrote those texts tended and tend to couch the ideas they treat in very difficult and technical language. This is no accident: with good philosophy, the difficulty of the language is appropriate to the complexity of the concepts discussed, and the complexity of the concepts is appropriate to the problems they are intended to solve. Often these problems demand solutions that are neither easy nor simple. Until students have grasped the important connection between the language, concepts, and problems of philosophy, they will not really have learned to read philosophy with any understanding. Neither will they be able to DO philosophy: before it is a body of knowledge, philosophy is essentially a practice — the practice of thinking critically. And the practice of philosophy is dependant upon the ability to read it.

If I am to educate students in philosophy, then, I have to teach them to read it, in all its difficulty and complexity. So, how to proceed, knowing that, for most students at Ryerson, philosophy is a foreign and unfamiliar language? By temperament and training, I am both an explainer and storyteller: and it is the skills from both roles that I bring to the classroom, in order that I might both explicate philosophical texts for students, and, in turn teach students to explicate those texts for themselves.

I present my materials (texts) in a lecture/discussion format. In those lectures, I proceed by leading my students through one of the stories that the assigned text could be said to tell. By identifying arguments, the stuff of philosophical texts, with stories, I am drawing a parallel between logical progression and fictional narrative. Both arguments and narratives are characterized by their ordering of the text's elements (be they premises or events) into a linear development towards a particular conclusion. And, both developments can have a dramatic impact.

Presenting the readings as stories, I act the thespian, carefully developing a sense of the rhythms, tempi and word orderings that will increase the drama with which my presentations of the readings approach their conclusions. The intent is to allow the students to see how the text's different points are significant because of their contribution to an overall narrative. It is also to allow students to more easily remember the article's points — anything is more easily remembered as a part of a thematic synthesis than it is in isolation. Dramatic effect is augmented by using increasingly exciting, humorous and memorable scenarios and examples to illustrate the text's points.

Good use of the blackboard also increases dramatic effect. To this end, blackboard notes should be rare, suggesting that they articulate only what is important; they should be written as I am talking, suggesting that what I am saying at that time is of particular note; and they should emphasize a point with which the class seems to be struggling — thus, they should change from class to class (and I should wait until the class is actually in progress before deciding what changes are needed, taking my cue from student reactions to my lectures).

Not only are my reading and encouragement of student responses to lectures necessary to their understanding of texts, they are also necessary to student participation in philosophy as a critical activity. To gauge and encourage such responses, it is important that I learn all my student's names and chat with each of them briefly, for at least a few classes each term. While this is difficult with a student load of plus two hundred students, it is not impossible (by the fourth week of term, I usually know all my students' names). Also important is the arrangement of seating: I always require that students sit as close to the front of the class as possible — I will never allow any student to feel that they can sit at the back of the room in anonymity. Finally, it is important to elicit student responses if none are volunteered. I ask students two kinds of questions: questions allowing them to demonstrate knowledge about the text and questions allowing them to bring their own experience and views to a subject. Clarity as to which kind of question I am asking is essential: if students think that I am always testing them on their knowledge of readings, they will clam up. Many of my questions, therefore, don't require that they have read: and I make it very clear when I am asking such questions.

I also make it clear that students are free to interrupt me during the lecture with questions and comments. To encourage such interruptions, I am careful to present material clearly (with plenty of illustrative examples) and

provocatively. Student silence can indicate to me that more examples and more explanation are needed; that points have to be more clearly marked out as important (time to use the blackboard). Else it can indicate that students are simply too tired to concentrate because it is 9:00am or 4:30pm, late in the week. To remedy this, I often get students to stand and move about, then sit and talk to their neighbours for a few minutes. I usually suggest that they take these social times as opportunities to make contacts from which they can get notes when they are away.

Having explained texts and encouraged student discussion, I usually end classes with a meta-view of the course so far. That is, I explain how the text studied relates in a significant manner to the other texts in the course. Thus do I show the students how the course itself operates as a story, its texts working as parts of a progression towards an articulation of the course's overall themes.

Term paper assignments serve two functions. The first is to see if the students can map the reading of texts provided in the lecture onto the texts themselves. To this end, they are required to reconstruct the stories from the lectures as summaries of the readings, showing where in the text the main points made in the lectures can be found, indicating how the text makes the kind of syntheses between points identified in the lectures. Thus does student reading of texts for purposes of the term paper become a third reading (the first reading is to occur before lectures, the second is the lecture itself, the third requires the student to read in light of what they have heard in the lecture — to find in the text the structure that the lecture identified).

The second function of the essay is to allow the student to show how texts relate to each other in important ways (thus my assigned essay topics are almost always "compare and contrast" essays). Again the essay functions as a third reading; this time, however, it is a reading of multiple texts as comprising a body of work. First the students read all the texts for the topic, then a study session at the end of one of the classes is dedicated to my illustrating how the texts are connected, finally the essay allows the students to articulate such connections for themselves. Papers are to be kept short (typically seven pages double spaced), for, it takes understanding to articulate a complete discussion with brevity.

To conclude, if students are to do philosophy, they must learn to read philosophy; if they are to be educated in a subject, they must be helped to master the difficult task of reading that subject's most difficult texts. As teacher, my job is to carefully guide students through the reading of a number of texts so that they will get the feel and rhythm of reading them; so that they will be able to apprehend the structure in them. It is also my job to ensure that students work with those texts by addressing their content and the issues articulated in that content in an active way — such addresses are the stuff of philosophical thought.