Teaching Philosophy

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"True philosophy entails relearning to see the world anew."

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception)*

I approach philosophy as the disciplined effort to think about our thinking and to disclose and critically evaluate the basic presuppositions that we take for granted in forming a coherent perspective on the world and on ourselves. I think that as sense-making beings, we are always in the business of articulating a general perspective on the world and our place in it, however tentative and inchoate this perspective may be at the start. Accordingly, in my teaching, I try to show students that we are always already implicitly involved with the practice of philosophy even in our most specialized, practical, and humdrum pursuits. Ultimately, in my view, the goal of a philosophical education is to take our implicit, all-too-human concern with foundational notions that lie at the basis of all our sense-making - notions such as being, value, knowledge, and self - and to make that concern explicit and self-conscious, so that we can responsibly take charge of our own sense-making.

In my experience, a key barrier to entry for students when it comes to philosophy is the difficulty many have in seeing how the abstract and general subject matter of philosophy could be relevant to their most immediate concerns. In my teaching, I try to show students that the unresolved foundational problems of philosophy - like the problem of knowledge, or of explaining what we are - lie at the basis of the perspective on reality that they currently take to be "just obvious." In my teaching, I approach philosophy as a practice of defamiliarizing and problematizing "the obvious." Through this defamiliarization, I think that a philosophical education can reveal the most obvious, familiar and taken-for-granted things as sources of inexhaustible wonder. My hope is that by creating a community of practice in my classroom aimed at "relearning to see", I can help students return to their most intimate concerns with fresh eyes.

Overall, I take my inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, who suggested that to be a philosopher is to approach life as "a perpetual beginner." I try to show students that since we can all be "perpetual beginners", we can establish through shared

philosophical practice a common ground for serious intellectual discourse about what matters that bypasses the intellectual specialization of higher learning that otherwise separates us.

In my teaching, my goal is not merely to give students the polished product of my philosophizing through lectures, but to instead also help them cultivate the skills they need to participate in the process of generating and communicating philosophical insight. My teaching practice is inspired by Jack Mezirow's (2000) theory of "transformative learning." On this view, the deepest learning occurs when students transform their perspective on the world. This transformation of perspective, according to Mezirow, is best facilitated when students learn to apply diverse frames of reference to reformulate problems, as well as to analyze and test the limitations of their presuppositions in dialogue with others. In my classroom, I apply this pedagogical approach by emphasizing from the start of each class that philosophy is above all, a practice. As a practice, it involves cultivating a core set of skills:

- deeply reading and critically evaluating the strengths and limitations of core philosophical texts (paying attention to identify and evaluate not just these texts' surface argumentative form, but also their foundational presuppositions);
- explaining, critically evaluating and constructing arguments;
- using argumentative essay writing as an instrument of thought;
- metacognition, or monitoring both the quality and the limitations of one's manner of thinking;
- engaging in dialogue by exercising *the principle of charity*; that is, internalizing others' perspectives and understanding them in their most rhetorically-forceful and aesthetically-appealing light (regardless of how antithetical to our own these views may be) prior to critiquing them.

I structure my courses at multiple time scales - at the level of the lesson, unit, and course as a whole - in terms of scaffolded, learner-centered activities and assessments (both formative and summative) that have as their learning outcomes each of these skills. For instance, in order to teach students how to engage in dialogue guided by the principle of charity, I provide them with weekly small group discussion opportunities in which I instruct them to reconstruct others' views and present them in their most persuasive light prior to mounting a strong objection to them. The energy of these discussions is invigorating, and I am always heartened to see how much students

come to appreciate and to embody this principle so crucial for well-functioning democratic discourse over the course of each term.

Moreover, I also try to model rational empathy in my lectures by presenting opposed sides of debates in their strongest form in order to communicate not just what the views are, but also what would drive a rational agent to adopt that view. On several occasions, students have commented that they valued my commitment to putting into practice the principle of charity in class. My goal in all this is to communicate to students both my respect for and my commitment to supporting them as they cultivate their intellectual autonomy, their own ideas and their own individual approach to philosophy.

In my view, learning to think and "relearning to see" both begin with learning to read deeply. I show students that philosophical texts are not just collections of inert theoretical propositions, but that they are instead recipes for reconfiguring their perspective on the world. These texts embody *ways of seeing*. Accordingly, to understand these texts is to re-enact the perspective they embody, and then to step back and identify its limitations. My lectures are designed to give students the tools they need to understand and *use* these texts as recipes for reflecting on and rethinking the structure of their own experience. Ultimately, I remind students that the meaning they get from the texts is a function of the level of their active engagement with and re-enactment of the perspective embodied in the text.

Moreover, I set aside small group discussion sessions each week. To guide these discussions, I design worksheets that guide students as they work together on answering questions about key aspects of the philosophical texts and theories that were discussed in lectures and readings, as well as debating the "pros and cons" of the different theories. Ultimately, these discussions are designed to help students better appreciate that philosophical theories are as much ways of seeing as they are ways of *not* seeing. For instance, in order to bring this point home for students in my *PHIL 100 - Classics* course, I designed an exercise that asked them to describe what they can know about a tree by applying Descartes' rationalism and Hume's empiricism as competing lenses on the tree. Such exercises encouraged students to flexibly shift between competing theoretical perspectives, and to appreciate that philosophical theories make sense of things by illuminating some aspects of things while obscuring others. Through such exercises, students learn to use philosophical theories as competing (and oftentimes complementary) frameworks for making sense of their

concrete experience. They also thereby improve their capacity to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the presuppositions of different theories and, in the process, they learn something about the limitations of their own presuppositions.

Another purpose of these discussion sessions is to facilitate the formation of a supportive learning community in which each contributing participant can enhance their metacognitive capacities. As Bransford (2000) pointed out, metacognition can be cultivated through dialogue with others. According to him, we develop our metacognitive ability to cultivate an "internal self-monitoring dialogue" by entering into earnest dialogue with others and by explaining not just the products of our reasoning, but also the quality of the process. (*Ibid*) The discussion assignments I provide each term offer students the opportunity to do just this. Through these exercises, students begin to identify gaps in their understanding. Many of my students have commented that the effort to explain concepts to one another in these discussion activities helped them realize what they did and did not fully understand. Ultimately, these discussion assignments provided students with an opportunity to cement their understanding of philosophical theories before having to write about them individually in their essays.

In my classes, I do my utmost to create a supportive and welcoming environment for all students. For instance, in order to accommodate the needs of students with diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds, I make sure to present concepts in various ways. In doing so, I supplement my lectures with carefully crafted slides that include, whenever possible, both verbal and visual presentations of core concepts in the forms of diagrams and carefully chosen images (often derived from my own photography). Moreover, when I teach courses in the history of philosophy, I often provide brief excerpts from literature and art history in order to show how philosophical ideas have begotten and inspired artistic traditions throughout the ages. In doing so, I show how philosophical ideas have had great generative power throughout history, while also drawing on the expressive power of art to body forth and concretize abstract philosophical ideas.

Moreover, I do my best to support the needs of my diverse classrooms by creating a space in which everyone feels safe to ask any questions. I pay special attention to the difficult task of trying to do justice to student questions. I do so by trying to get behind the surface questions, in order to get a sense of what students are trying to say, and of how I may help them say it better. I answer questions only after first restating what I take the students to be trying to articulate. I try to make their point

as clearly and as persuasively as I can. I then check to see if my response satisfied the intent behind the question. In my experience, students appreciate my efforts to make them feel really heard. Similarly, when providing constructive feedback on their work, I make sure to first understand and affirm the guiding intent behind their work, and then to try to help them find ways to better achieve what they had hoped to achieve.

Finally, I put great emphasis on writing in my classes. I address the discomfort that many students experience when it comes to writing essays by encouraging them to see philosophical writing as a process of cementing their understanding. I design essay prompts with an eye to helping students master the twofold movement of thought that I think produces the most lasting philosophical insight: on the one hand, a movement of "zooming out" to see the big picture perspective that gives one a sense of the general significance of the topic at hand and, on the other hand, a movement of "zooming in" to perform detailed, nuanced and rigorous analysis of that same topic. Many students comment that they have a hard time finding the right balance between these movements of thought. However, by the end of term, I find that students tend to find more of this balance as they work with me by earnestly practicing their writing and revising their work in light of my feedback. As one student said to me, "Writing for this class made me realize that you don't know what you don't know until you write about it."

Ultimately, by cultivating an atmosphere that guides and supports deliberate, effortful philosophical practice, I strive to show students that what they get out of their philosophical education is a direct function of how much of themselves they invest into such practice. In the process, I hope to be a small, but helpful part of their larger process of becoming autonomous, lifelong learners capable of critical thinking and of reflecting on the strengths and limitations of their ever-evolving perspective on themselves and on the world.

References:

Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How People Learn*.
Mezirow, J. and Associates. (2000). *Learning as Transformation.*