

## **Philosophy of Teaching, and Goals**

My role as a philosophy teacher is to curate a meaningful and valuable interaction with the methodologies and literature of philosophy. Since I'm familiar with the different positions and arguments, my job is to construct an experience where students engage with issues and concepts in a useful and beneficial way. Part of my job is to select philosophical topics and materials that are motivating, and accessible yet challenging. Part of my job is to model good work in philosophy by showing students what reading philosophy well looks like, walking them through the structures of arguments, and modeling good reasoning. Part of my job is to enable students to develop these skills as their own.

The two main goals for my students, especially in my general ed. and 'special audience' (e.g. medical ethics) courses, are that they A) recognize how commitments in one area have implications for other areas, and B) develop the skills needed to evaluate stances and articulate why their own stance is reasonable. I take these as central because they are what will serve the students best in their other courses and after graduation (when they inevitably forget facts about the particular content covered). Accomplishing these goals requires teaching students how to read difficult texts, how to draw connections between readings, and how to effectively compose an argumentative paper.

These general goals manifest differently in different courses, depending on various facts about the course and of the students' particular needs. For instance, in medical ethics—as a variation on B—it's important for students to be able to make concrete decisions about non-idealized cases with limited information, since that's what nurses, doctors, and researchers will encounter. In introduction to ethics courses, it's important that students grasp the difference between normative claims and normatively relevant empirical claims. In advanced or upper-level courses, further skills and conceptual competencies are important. For instance, upper level philosophy students must be able to accomplish additional depth and sophistication of analysis. In both ethics and metaphysics courses, students must be able to distinguish metaphysical questions—what is the nature of X?—from epistemological questions—how can we know about X?

### **Goal A**

To accomplish goal A in a summer Introduction to Philosophy course, I had my students consider a set of apparently disconnected issues in philosophy. Specifically, the mind-body problem, personal identity, the (metaphysical) criterion of death, and the moral significance of death. The course culminated in a long term paper developing a “worldview,” explaining and defending stances on the individual topics, as well as articulating and defending the set of stances as a coherent unit.

I also accomplish goal A with smaller projects. In what serves as Intro to Ethics at the UNL (Phil 106), a major goal is for students to recognize and articulate how commitments on one ethical issue have broader implications. The papers require making novel applications of the positions and arguments covered. For example, for one paper we cover some classic applications to famine relief (Singer, Harden, Nell), and a salient pair of papers on abortion (Marquis, followed by Thomson). From this, students must take a stance on whether we have an obligation to donate blood or organs. So, they must identify which parts of Singer, Nell, Marquis and Thomson's arguments are relevant to this question, explain why, and defend a final stance. As a follow up, they explain how their arguments relate to the original topics, and assess and respond to any inconsistencies and tensions.

### **Goal B**

My medical ethics course is a great example of how I accomplish goal B. The last assignment is to find a news article about some medical event relevant to the final unit, explain what the moral

issue is (and why it's one), and argue for a relevant moral conclusion. To get them to be able to do this well, we work through a series of increasingly demanding tasks over the course of the term. First I lead the class through the steps for evaluating a simple case study. We evaluate another simple one as a class, then the students evaluate in small groups further cases. Each case is on the topic being covered at the time. Each step builds experience with the general task, develops the skills for engaging with a case study on their own, and clarifies expectations about what is to be accomplished. Next, students write two independent papers on case studies of their choice from a bank I provide for each unit; first on simpler cases, the second on more difficult ones. Now students are ready to find and respond to a case study "in the wild," which is especially important in a medical ethics class, as many students will go on to medical professions and will continually be faced with "wild cases."

### **Assessment and Improvement**

I self-evaluate how well certain methods are accomplishing my goals, and respond accordingly. For example, I changed from giving electronic comments on rough drafts, to holding in-person meetings about drafts, to only discussing the outline stage of papers. I made these changes because I found that when final drafts often weren't suitably revised from the original draft; students can feel committed to the text already on the page, and are more receptive to "preemptive" advice.

This past term, after seeing how my students were struggling, not just to reconstruct the main argument of an undergraduate level reading, but also to reliably assess how a paragraph relates to the ones surrounding it, I decided to greatly slow down the course (cutting about 1/3 of the content), in order to focus on developing this sort of skill. Even though this made some students feel like the course was a slog, I observed a marked improvement in their argument comprehension abilities, which translated to improved argumentative abilities.

I've had trouble getting buy-in from students when teaching on animal ethics. Most recently I attempted to foster buy-in by beginning with having students try to explain fact that dogfighting is wrong. This was supposed to foster buy-in by showing students their intuitive commitment to animals' moral status. This did improve on previous courses, but some felt this was too heavy handed of a rejection of "no status." Next time I need to begin with the *question* of whether dogfighting is wrong, since this will let them view the answer as their own. This will let me play devil's advocate and demonstrate the broader implications of "no-status," and let students come to the reject it on their own (or, feel more comfortable with the option of defending it).

### **Professional Development**

I take my continued development as a teacher seriously. To this end I attended the American Association of Philosophy Teachers (AAPT) Summer Seminar on Teaching and Learning in Philosophy (July 2016), took a Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) course at UNL (May/June 2016). In the AAPT seminar and PFF course we learned strategies for effective course design. Most significant for me was learning about backwards course design as a way to better align learning activities and the course goals. I recently completed training course for teaching online, which also helps me improve the online side of my in-person courses.

I have had two papers on teaching and learning in philosophy accepted into the AAPT biennial conference. The first is discussion of the relevance to course design and delivery of a "backfire effect" that happens with public information campaigns where corrective information reinforces the myth, and how to adapt the strategies for avoiding this. The second is on a course module for intro students about the way that thought experiments help us in philosophical reasoning, why the often-farfetched elements are needed, and why other sorts of stories (parables, movies, anecdotes) can't play this role.