



LEARNING SKILLS BY USING THEM IN A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Teaching Portfolio Dan Weijers 2017

HIGHLIGHTS

My teaching background

I am a Lecturer in the Philosophy Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato (June 2016-present). Before that, I was an Assistant Professor in the Philosophy Department at California State University Sacramento (2014-2016) and a Postdoctoral Fellow at Victoria University of Wellington (2012-2014).

At the University of Waikato, I teach and convene a range of philosophy papers, and I regularly contribute to a psychology methods paper and a positive psychology paper.

I conduct interdisciplinary research on happiness and well-being, and mixed methods philosophical research on ethics and the good life.



Introduction and teaching philosophy

"...unless you want a job as a deep-sea trivia master, memorising facts is no longer a useful skill"

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Evaluating learning and teaching

"philosophy's most experienced tutor... said that they were the best first-year essay answers she has ever marked"

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Introduction and teaching philosophy

Do you remember all of the facts you learnt during your tertiary study? Me neither. You and I were unusual students; we managed to recall the relevant facts for long enough to do very well in our studies. The weaker students could remember about as much on test day as all of us do now.

These days being able to recite facts is not a very useful ability. Thanks to wifi and the internet, information is now readily available in all of the places people frequent. "Facts" are also increasingly under threat. The rapid advances in increasingly specialised academic fields mean facts are regularly outmoded. And, the increasing acceptance of "alternate facts" (previously known as unfounded opinions) makes facts dialectically weak without attendant justifications.

This trouble for facts is fortunate for us. Any one educator can only be more knowledgeable than the internet in an increasingly specific domain – their research niche – and many educators will fail to "outknow" the internet in any domain at all. So, if we want to avoid being replaced by an app, we had better have something other than a bevy of facts to offer.

The better teachers have probably known this for a long

time, but I discovered it during my 15-year teaching journey:

Education is about providing the right environment and encouragement for students to develop useful skills, competencies, and dispositions.

Most importantly, unless you want a job as a deep-sea trivia master, memorising facts is no longer a useful skill. Useful skills include being able to comprehend and critique novel information in many domains and from a variety of sources, and also to come up with creative and logical solutions to problems.

In light of all this, I have given up attempting to fill my students up by pouring facts into their heads. Like trying to fill a holey bucket, it would require constant effort to keep it full. Instead, I encourage my students to develop skills and competencies by doing things – learning by doing.

I hope that by learning how to be critical and creative thinkers, they become self-motivated life-long learners with the skills to plug the lowest hole in their bucket and find the most useful liquid to pour in. I do not expect them to know everything, but I do expect them to know how to discover and evaluate information in order to successfully solve problems.



Educate for skills

"More than 100 companies have so far signed an open letter saying that tertiary qualifications are not required for a range of skilled roles in their workplaces. Instead, they say they are willing to focus on assessing the skills, attitudes, motivation and adaptability of candidates."

– Susan Edmunds reporting for Stuff.co.nz, 26 September 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/>



Critical thinking

"We need creativity, we need critical thinking skills, we need the moral facility to work in an uncertain future"

– Stuart Brock (Associate Dean: Academic Programmes in FHSS at VUW), Radio New Zealand, 25 September 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/>



Paradigm shift in university education

Old paradigm: Student is a "passive vessel to be filled with knowledge".
New paradigm: Student is an "active constructor, discoverer, transformer of knowledge".

– Campbell, W. E. & Smith, K. A., eds. (1997). *New paradigms for college teaching*. Edina, MN, USA: Interaction Book Company, p. 275.

Planning and design for learning

By the end of the course, I want my students to know they have achieved the learning outcomes. So, my courses require students perform key tasks in a supportive environment *during* the course. When planning a course, this means starting with the learning outcomes and working backwards.

I picked up this approach from reading Fink's (2013) *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*. Getting students to practice skills regularly during a course requires a radical shift in thinking for many educators. The extra time needed for students to practice skills during a course often comes at the expense of the amount of content that can be covered.

The worry that many teachers have is that their students will finish the course without "knowing" all of the basics. The mistake those teachers are making is expecting their students to remember all of the facts that get poured into their heads during the course. Some of those facts may be kept in long enough to be released onto an exam script, but only a few drops will still be there after the summer break.

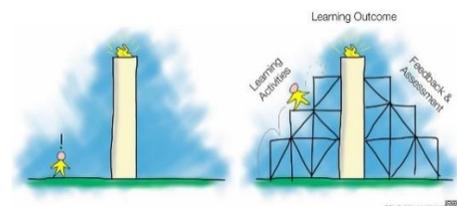
I plan to teach less content than I used to, but my courses now require students to regularly practice using key skills. So, even if my students forget any facts they pick up along the way, they are likely to remember how to do certain things for a long period of

time, perhaps indefinitely if they continue to do those things after they leave university.

Of course, students can't be expected to perform complex tasks, like argument analysis, without any guidance. I use the principles of scaffolded learning when designing my courses. I get students to start on relatively simple versions of the complex task, while providing clear instructions and prompt feedback. As the course progresses, the complexity of the task increases and the instructions become less detailed. The initial tasks are often completed in groups, but students also complete some tasks individually, and are assessed individually.

Incorporating scaffolded learning into a course requires planning in-class activities and content delivery around the introduction and practice of key skills.

The ordering of all this is also important – the complexity of the tasks should not outpace the introduction of the relevant skills, and assessment of a skill should not occur before the opportunity to practice that skill in a supportive low-stakes environment. Furthermore, each task should be challenging, but not overwhelming, which, given the diversity of students, usually means making additional help available.



Scaffolded learning...

"... describes a cluster of instructional techniques designed to move students from a novice position toward greater understanding, such that they become independent learners."

– Colter, R., & Ulatowski, J. (2017). The unexamined student is not worth teaching: preparation, the zone of proximal development, and the Socratic Model of Scaffolded Learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, online first, 1-14. Retrieved from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/>



Planning for success

"He planned out every lecture well and made sure everyone understood the material covered. He also used many aspects of teaching for each lecture, and he further promoted learning by always asking for students opinions of beliefs on each topic."

– From my 2017 FTEA nomination narratives

PHIL208-17A(HAM)
Response rate: 75% (18/24)

100%

"Top box" responses to "This teacher encouraged me to participate actively in my learning"

83%

"Always" responses to "This teacher used an effective structure for each session"



Setting the mood

"He presented and talked about very personal topics without people shouting at each other in disagreement. Maintained attention with comedy, as well as providing the information needed to pass the paper."

– From my 2017 FTEA nomination narratives



Class culture by example

"He is a humble and kind teacher who gets students to engage in course material and lectures in various ways. The lectures feel relaxed and intellectually stimulating at the same time. Subsequently, students get to think and speak for themselves in a comfortable environment. Points made by students in class are taken seriously and used by Dan to enhance everybody's learning, which makes all students feel valuable."

– From my 2017 FTEA nomination narratives

PHIL106-17A(HAM)
Response rate: 73% (107/146)

88%

"Always" responses to "This teacher treated students fairly and with respect"

84%

"Always" responses to "This teacher encouraged students to take an active part in class"

Facilitating learning

The scaffolded learning approach that has underpinned my teaching, requires students to practice skills during class. In philosophy, this usually means understanding, critiquing, and developing arguments – logically constructed sets of claims and justifications that provide reason to believe a conclusion. In order to gain external feedback on their development and application of these skills during class time, students must collaborate with each other and express their understandings, critiques, and original arguments to others (usually) orally.

Unlike in many fact-based courses, the "correct answer" will not be highlighted in a textbook that students can have in front of them during lectures. As such, students that verbalise their understandings, critiques, and original arguments in philosophy classes are really putting themselves "out there" – they are exposed to potential failure and embarrassment.

I make it clear that mistakes are very normal in philosophy, and that being shown to be wrong is actually a kind of blessing in disguise. To paraphrase Socrates:

If we genuinely want to learn, then being proven wrong is helpful because it moves us closer towards the truth (or at least further away from falsehoods).

We spend a relatively large amount of time collaboratively establishing the culture and ground rules in the first week of class. We always discuss how our reactions to the contributions of others can have a huge effect on the learning environment. I also model challenging but relaxed and respectful dialogue throughout the course.

When dealing with student contributions during lectures, I point out the good in their ideas before providing constructive feedback. In true Socratic fashion, I usually do this by paraphrasing and clarifying their point before asking them a follow up question. The follow up is often either asking for a justification for their claim, or to provide an example. The point of asking these questions is to get students to practice making complete and well-supported arguments.

This focus on a supportive and respectful environment, coupled with ample opportunities to verbalise their views, facilitates students' learning by encouraging them to practice philosophical skills regularly during the course. Several times during each lecture, students "think, pair, share" on important questions. In tutorials and smaller lectures, the teaching time is broken up by structured group activities with roaming facilitation.

Assessing learning

To move away from transmitting knowledge and facts, I combine formative and summative assessments as much as possible to ensure accountability and maximise learning opportunities.

Students are exposed to regular low-stakes assessment, including early in the course, so that they can better understand their learning progress and manage their learning journey.

Assessments are planned to facilitate all of the learning objectives as much as possible.

For example, in a second-year philosophy of science course, I instituted surprise reading quizzes. There were 13 quizzes that would usually occur at the beginning of a lecture, but may occur at any time during any of the lectures, including the possibility of having more than one quiz in a lecture. The quizzes usually had three comprehension questions and were worth three marks each. Students were given a structured guide to study for the quizzes that stressed the importance of pulling the main argument out of the reading.

Each student's worst three quizzes did not count towards their final grade. The surprise nature of the quizzes was to encourage students to attend class, come on time, and pay attention until the end of class. The quizzes were also designed to

facilitate my flipped teaching style – we could use the majority of class time to analyse the material, and do activities that enabled me to guide them while they were practicing their philosophical skills. The quiz answers were discussed with students immediately after the quiz, which allowed them to gauge their own understanding. This also enabled me to focus on any weaknesses in their understanding during the class.

My students have enjoyed working on a structured essay assignment. They were required to write an essay that summarised and then critiqued the argument in a target article. The target reading was on a topic that we had discussed in class, but students had to understand the reading and critique it on their own – we did not discuss the target essay in class. The target essay was a complicated and fairly obscure article that was not summarised anywhere online. Students knew that the target article was complicated and that they should set aside a lot of time to work on this assignment.

Despite being completely unaided with the specific content of the target article, students had already practiced applying all of the skills they would need for this complex task many times over during the course. They had already carefully extracted the argument from at least a dozen readings to prepare for the quizzes. I had

also gotten students to practice the required argument analysis skills individually and collectively in a variety of in-class activities, including small-group competitions on writing introductions, argument diagramming, and critiquing.

Since students were “on their own” in regards to applying the relevant skills in both the quizzes and the essay assignment, I am confident that the students who excelled in these assessments have the philosophical skills that were the learning outcomes for the course. I was very impressed at the degree of mastery that nearly all of the students achieved.

But, it is not really a surprise that they did well. Instead of cramming for a final exam on a wide range of content, only to have it leak out again immediately afterwards, they regularly practiced skills in an environment that steadily became less structured until they could confidently apply the skills on their own. The in-class activities and the regular structured assessment were the scaffolding that was pulled away for the essay assignment.

Success in the essay assignment gave them the confidence in their newly developed skills, skills that enable them to understand and critique novel and complex information – skills that make memorizing facts much less important, and using the huge amount of information available much easier.





Feedback on quizzes

50% of the responses to “What aspects of the paper helped you to learn?” mentioned the quizzes, including:

“The way that the paper was set out with most of our marks based on regular readings and participation and in-class quizzes helped me to keep up with the workload and attend class often.”

“The structure of the paper allowed me to learn most effectively. E.g. readings before class, followed by (potential) quiz, learning about the reading in class -having to read and make notes in case there was a quiz and then having the content explained and examined in class helped me learn the content quite easily.”

–PHIL208-17A(HAM) Student feedback

PHIL208-17A(HAM)

Response rate: 75% (18/24)

94%

“Strongly agree” responses to “Overall, this paper provided me with a good learning experience”

PHIL106-17A(HAM)

Response rate: 73% (107/146)

94%

“Top box” responses to “Overall, this paper provided me with a good learning experience”

PHIL150-16B(HAM)

Response rate: 19% (27/140)

100%

“Top box” responses to “Overall, this teacher was effective”

Evaluating learning and teaching

Starting in A semester 2017, I have gone to great lengths to encourage student feedback. The result has been much higher response rates (e.g., see the data to the left).

After the student feedback becomes available each semester, I take the time to document the challenges I encountered in my teaching, and ponder how I can do better next time. I consider the student feedback carefully, but mainly with an eye to comparing the comments with my previous comments. Especially important to me are comments about the features of the course and teaching that are different to the norm or that I am trialling.

For example, while not unique to my courses, surprise quizzes are not the norm at any of the institutions that I have used them at, so I looked out for comments on them, and specifically asked for feedback on them where possible. Student feedback on the quizzes was consistently positive, with the majority saying that the quizzes made them do the reading, and as a result, they felt like they learnt a lot more in this course compared to others.

Even more important than student’s comments, I monitor and reflect on the effect of course redesign on the quality of students’ work. My courses always involve essays of one kind or another, so it is relatively easy to compare how good students are at writing philosophical

essays from year to year. But I don’t just rely on my opinion of the quality of students’ work; I also ask my colleagues and experienced tutors.

For example, when I taught PHIL150-16B: Introduction to Philosophy with Joe Ulatowski for the first time in 2016, we redesigned the assessment in line with the principles of scaffolded learning.

Specifically, we organised the two essays and the essay-based final test such that there was a lot of structure for the first essay, a moderate amount for the second essay, and only a little for the final test. A large part of the first essay was focussed on one skill – inputting a missing premise in a deductive argument. The instructions for the essay ran over two pages, and included an example of inputting the missing premise in an argument with the same structure, but different content. This particular skill was previously discussed in class, and students had practised it in a supportive environment during tutorials.

The second essay had less than a page of instructions, and the in-class test essays had a few lines. Joe and I were delighted when philosophy’s most experienced tutor, who was marking the in-class test essays, said that...

...they were the best first-year essay answers she has ever marked.

Professional development and leadership in teaching

I do not consider myself as a leader in teaching. I am fortunate to be, and have been, in institutional environments in which effective teaching has been an important goal.

Nearly every workday, I have a morning coffee break with other members of the Philosophy Programme. We spend at least a third of that time talking about teaching and learning.

We share and critique hypotheses and experiences with the aim of improving our pedagogy and outcomes for our students.

We work on consolidating our knowledge of philosophy-specific best pedagogical practice by spreading effective techniques across our range of course offerings, especially at first year, where large class sizes and a more diverse student body pose greater challenges.

As a result of these regular discussions, scaffolded learning is becoming increasingly ensconced through agreed upon learning outcomes and tutorial worksheets that emphasize skill development through guided practice.

In addition to these conversations, I continue to learn about pedagogy in variety of more structured ways. I regularly attend the teaching and learning, teaching technologies, and supervision events at the

University of Waikato, and teaching conferences and workshops elsewhere if I consider them relevant to my teaching.

For example, I attended a Diversity in Philosophy conference in Auckland this year, a Teaching Philosophy workshop in 2015 in California, and an Ako Victoria Teaching Diversity conference in Wellington in 2013. I have also attended several Maori culture and language training events, and volunteered briefly as a cross-cultural ambassador at Victoria University of Wellington.

In October, I will be presenting in two different sessions at LearnFest; I will be discussing how to get students reading, and I will take part in a panel session about student engagement.



Professional development in teaching and learning is important for all of us

Responses to "In what ways did this teacher help you learn?" that reveal what low expectations some of our students have of us as teachers:

"Didn't read off the slides and actually taught us things."

"Very interesting style of teaching, made me want to come to lectures which is a big deal for me."

"He was very open and receptive to arguments and ideas... It didn't feel like he was talking down to us."

"He ... never went off on unnecessary tangents. He always reminded us when the due date of our assignments were approaching ... some of my lecturers don't do this. He just seemed like he generally wanted everyone to succeed in his class... he was a great lecturer."

– PHIL106-17A Student feedback

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