



SKILLS FOR LEARNING, SKILLS FOR LIFE

Teaching Portfolio

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HIGHLIGHTS

My teaching background

I am a Lecturer in the Philosophy Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the University of Waikato - Te Whare Wānanga o 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).

I teach and convene a range of philosophy papers, and I regularly contribute to several other papers in FASS. I love teaching so much, I teach a group of amateur philosophers one evening a fortnight!

I research wellbeing, moral theory, and applied ethics from an interdisciplinary and mixed methods perspective. I love that my job gives me the opportunity to encourage students to develop skills for learning and for life.



A dangerous teaching philosophy

"...125 shark attacks have been reported in New Zealand"

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Taking teaching seriously

"Do you have time for another aphorism? Of course you do; that's kind of the point of them!"

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Introduction and teaching philosophy

As a philosopher, my teaching philosophy is thoughtful, detailed, and nuanced. Or, as my wife would put it, long-winded, addicted to “however’s”, and far too friendly to commas. So, I’d better start with the catchy aphoristic version: Skills for learning, skills for life.

We both know how astute you are, so of course you noticed an emphasis on skills in my teaching philosophy. Why skills as opposed to content? That’s simple. The Internet provides unparalleled access to the world’s experts and their views on the most recent findings about nearly every kind of “fact” imaginable.

Imagine me scouring the Net just before a lecture to ensure that I know the very latest and most factual facts. Of course, I reveal these freshly minted facts with great pomp. Then I pause to hear my students gasp as they gratefully accept from me that greatest gift of all – knowledge. Hmm... no gasps. To make matters worse, a student was fact-checking me on her phone while I was parading my favourite new fact around. Oh dear, her phone must be smarter than me because it just found a fact fresher and, dare I say it, much more factual than mine.

The spell is broken. They’ve peeked behind the curtain.

Communication technology has made teaching facts obso-

lete, at least as the main goal of education. As a frequent practitioner of empirical research, I am actually quite fond of facts. Facts can be very useful, but only if used skillfully. The fact “125 shark attacks have been reported in New Zealand” seems to have a very different meaning if you add “since record-keeping began about 200 years ago” and “sheep inflicted 1612 injuries in 2013 alone”. As you well know, skills are also required to tell facts from “alternative facts” (previously known as unfounded opinions), and to clearly explain to others why acceptance of alternative facts can be dangerous.

The better teachers have probably known this for a long time, but I discovered it during my 16-year teaching journey: Education is about providing the right environment and encouragement for students to develop useful skills and dispositions.

Useful skills include being able to comprehend and critique novel information in many domains and from a variety of sources, and to come up with creative and logical solutions to problems.

These are the skills for learning, but they can also help us live better lives.

For example, by thinking critically about our goals and how best to achieve them.



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/>



Think like a shark

“The Shark Attack Data website records 125 attacks in New Zealand - however this includes incidents such as sharks roughly bumping into people.”

– Newshub staff, ‘Shark map shows New Zealand areas with most attacks Zealand’, 8 June 2018. Retrieved from: <http://www.newshub.co.nz/>



Don’t educate like a sheep

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

Do you have time for another aphorism? Of course you do; that's kind of the point of them! *Planning for learning is planning for practice.*

Traditional content-based courses are usually based on a plan to "teach" a lot of domain-specific information to students. This leaves little time for students to practice, which means little chance of developing skills. Rushing through complex content also robs most students of the time they need to engage deeply with the novel ideas. Little time for engagement with novel ideas means little chance of recall. So, by planning to cover a lot of content, many content-based courses don't encourage skill development *or even* their main goal of knowledge acquisition!

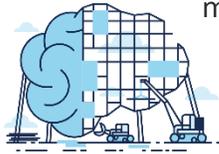
As pointed out in L. Dee Fink's inspirational book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2013), getting students to practice skills regularly during a course requires a radical shift in thinking for many educators. The extra time needed for students to practice skills during a course often comes at the expense of the amount of content that can be covered.

How did I give up the content-overload habit? By realizing that "amount of content delivered" is a very poor measure of "amount of learning achieved".

The learning objectives I had in mind, *including the content-based ones*, were best realised by slowing down and making space for students to regularly practice using key skills on the content in a supportive environment.

By "supportive environment", I mean much more than words of encouragement. I use the principles of scaffolded learning when designing my courses. I plan assessments and in-class activities in such a way that students start on relatively simple versions of complex tasks (like thinking of counter examples) in low-stakes conditions before getting to any major assessments (like writing argumentative essays).

I also plan assignment instructions and lecture notes ahead of time to ensure that my expectations for each assessment are clear and complete. The instructions include pro-tips, informing students of common errors and explaining how to avoid them. For the final assessment, which effectively requires students to repeat the complex task they have been practicing with new material, I take most of the instructions (scaffolding) away. I encourage them to use the same skills they have already practiced, and think about the feedback they have received on their earlier attempts at the complex task.



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*, 49(14), 1367. Retrieved from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/>



...for successful skill acquisition

"...All instructions were clear and concise, and there was excellent preparation for tests and assignments. I know that I will take away the skills of knowledge about different philosophical theories, but also the ability to critically analyse a given situation..."

– From my 2018 FTEA nomination narratives

PHILO106-18A(HAM)
Response rate: 76% (78/102)

100%

"Top box" responses to "This teacher communicated what was expected of me"

100%

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



Caring is encouraging

"Dan has the ability to expand students' minds in a way that it will have long lasting positive effects in their lives and futures. He engages his students with expertise and professionalism that is fluidly imparted. He cares! Because he cares, students care too."

– From my 2018 FTEA nomination narratives



Creating safe spaces to engage

"...you were super informative, approachable, and you made class interactions that helped expand our social capital so we were able to communicate with other students"

– An answer to "What helped you learn?" from my student feedback on PHILO150-17B(HAM)

"He never told anyone their opinions were wrong and made everyone feel included."

– Answer to "How did this teacher help you learn?", feedback on PHILO106-18A(HAM)

PHILO150-17B(HAM)
Response rate: 67% (88/131)

85%

"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 underpinning my teaching, requires students to practice skills during class... in front of their peers. If that's not scary enough, the skills we philosophers aim to develop in students include understanding, critiquing, and developing complex arguments – logically constructed sets of claims and justifications that provide generally compelling reasons to believe a conclusion. So, in addition to worrying about whether they are getting the facts right (understanding the theories and arguments discussed), they also have to argue with each other and justify their own views in a way that is epistemically motivating for people who might not share the same background beliefs.

In a nutshell, *my classes require students to really "put themselves out there" – they are exposed to potential failure and embarrassment in a variety of important ways*, including being caught out strongly believing something without having a good epistemic justification for it.

Since I genuinely want my students to achieve the learning outcomes, and because I know that practicing skills is the best way to develop them (e.g., Fortune, Lee, & Cavazos, 2007), I go to great lengths to create a supportive environment for learning.

I dedicate ample time in the first week of lectures to creating a positive classroom culture. I use an inclusive and collaborative approach to get students to demand a respectful attitude from each other and from me.

I also stress 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 to the truth.

Most importantly, I do my best to enact and enforce the collaboratively established values of the class. The main way I do this is through dealing with student contributions during lectures in a respectful and constructive manner.

As a general rule, I point out the good in a comment, or the intention behind it, before providing constructive feedback. I usually do this by paraphrasing and clarifying their point before asking them a follow up question. The follow up is often either designed to encourage them to practice making complete and well-supported arguments or to challenge them to think about the next step in the argument.

I hope that my classes encourage students to create positive environments wherever they go, creating safe spaces for dialogue and mutual learning on important topics for all of us.

Assessing learning

Since my learning objectives are skills based, my assessments are skills-based too. Never wanting to miss an opportunity to encourage students to learn, I also use a lot of active-formative assessment. This means that the assessments I set require students to practice the skills they should be developing while also having an opportunity to reflect on their own thinking, including their own views about important topics and how the course content might apply to their own lives.

The benefits of active learning are well-known to education researchers. They include: engaging “students more deeply in the process of learning... encouraging critical thinking and fostering the development of self-directed learning. ... [As well as helping] students to connect the information from the classroom to practice in the outside world.” (Van Amburgh et al., 2007, p. 1)

The outside world? What, you might ask, does philosophy have to do with the (modern) outside world?

Well, I’m glad you asked. Aside from the obvious employment-related benefits of critical thinking – the most valuable general-purpose skill for any job worth having (see my 2017 portfolio for more on this) – the philosophy courses I teach are about topics of central importance to our lives.

My new course, PHIL0225-18A(HAM): Happiness and well-being is a perfect example. The last of eight learning outcomes for the course is “To identify what they think ultimately makes their life go well for them”. The word “ultimately” is key here. Most of my students can distinguish between things that are good and things that are bad for them; more money = good, fewer supportive relationships = bad.

But, few if any students have stopped to consider what ultimately makes their life go well for them. An understanding of this ultimate value can have profound effects on people’s lives. They would be better equipped to make prudential choices, enabling them to make informed decisions about whether to sacrifice family time for more pay or whether to travel or save for retirement.

Hopefully you can see the importance of the learning objective – but how could I assess that? By planning all of the in-class activities and formal assessments to build up students’ confidence, skills, and knowledge of wellbeing – that’s how.

The first part of the course covers the main philosophical theories of wellbeing and how to critique them. Students were quizzed at the half way point and end of the first section on the basic terminology and meaning of the theories to ensure all

students could participate fully in our regular discussions of the theories in class.

Every week, during the first part of the course, students practice critiquing theories of wellbeing in class (starting with the made-up easy target “the beer theory”). Also every week, students answer a few questions in their journal, which gets them to reconsider and consolidate their learning from the week. The journal questions directly prepare them to tackle their first essay (e.g., What is the strongest objection to the theory? How would you respond to this objection on behalf of the theory?).

At the conclusion of the first section of the course, students begin an essay assignment on their favored view of wellbeing. Their task is to explain and defend the theory from the

strongest objection against it. Since writing a philosophical essay is a new task for many of the students, I provide a detailed essay writing guide that includes a paragraph-by-paragraph break down with pro tips for each one (e.g., “Discuss one objection in detail rather than 2 or more because depth and subtlety will receive better marks than breadth and superficiality”).

So, students’ initial learning about theories of wellbeing is consolidated every week, and put squarely under the microscope by aligning the question, what is wellbeing?, with a major piece of active formative formal assessment.





Sometimes learning objectives are confirmed unexpectedly

Would you recommend this course?
Why/why not?:

“Yes because it helps you think a lot more in depth about how you should live, it also helps you make decisions about this by presenting empirical information and getting you to engage in deep thinking. Subsequently, I think it helps you become more critical of science, and maybe more informed of when it comes to thinking about the politics, and what the aim of the government should be.”

“Definitely. This course stands out to me as the content can be directly applied to my life and can improve it. It's not just learning for the sake of learning.”

–PHILO225-18A(HAM) Student feedback

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

PHILO150-17B(HAM)
Response rate: 67% (88/131)

94%

PHILO106-18A(HAM)
Response rate: 76% (78/102)

100%

PHILO225-18A(HAM)
Response rate: 18% (15/82)*

93%

* Note the response rates. Feedback incentives were not used for PHILO225-18A(HAM)

Evaluating learning and teaching

I value student feedback very highly. I am aware that general ratings tend to be heavily influenced by “likability” among other factors, but there are many ways formal student feedback surveys can be used.

I use specific questions with open ended response fields to assess students’ own views on important pedagogical issues. For example, I ask them how frequently they come to class and why they sometimes do not come. I do the same for readings. I ask them why they chose this particular course, whether they would recommend it to a friend, and whether they are planning on taking another philosophy class (I have a marketing degree!). I also ask them what they think of philosophy and what they got out of the course.

I cannot stress enough how important I think these questions and students’ answers to them are!

The mere asking of these questions provides students with an excellent low-stakes formative assessment. Facing these questions, many students will reflect on what they have been learning, and think about whether that learning was valuable to them and why. They may also think about what they did to help themselves learn and what they might do to improve their learning outcomes in the future. I suppose some may come to the realisation that they don’t really

value learning at all! That’s fine by me. Better that they save their money for something they really value, and possibly return to study later in life when they are ready to take advantage of what university study has to offer.

At this point, you shouldn’t be surprised when I say I’m interested in getting feedback from as many students as possible. With response rates between 10 and 30% common around the university, I have been experimenting with methods for raising response rates.

I have always communicated my belief in the importance of evaluations to students, including commenting on how they have changed my teaching. This may have some effect, but I can tell you that it is insignificant compared to the effect of giving students an incentive to provide feedback.

When I incentivize feedback, I get 60-90% compliance. When I do not, I get around 18-19%.

And don’t say I’m bribing them! My surveys take a long time to complete because I care about what they have to say. When you think about it, what is in it for students? They are already busy. Why should they give their time to us for free when we charge them for ours? Besides, all I do is offer to restrict the range of possible prompts on the final assessment, allowing them to focus their study.

Professional development and leadership in teaching

I (still) do not consider myself a leader in teaching. But, I was honoured to be awarded both a FASS and a University Teaching Excellence Award last year.

I am very glad that the Teaching Excellence Awards exist. By requiring us to put together a teaching portfolio, the awards encourage us to reflect on how to become more effective teachers. Even seeing the announcements about the Awards might prompt a staff member to discuss pedagogy with a colleague, or perhaps even ask an expert from Te Puna Ako about (e.g.) whether they should incorporate a new technology into their teaching.

I am lucky to be immersed in a supportive environment. My colleagues love discussing how to improve our teaching. I am also very grateful that the staff at Te Puna Ako find time for my difficult questions despite dealing with university-wide projects.

I was delighted to be invited to be the Teaching Advocate for FASS shortly after my awards last year. I hope that I can help spread the enthusiasm about teaching and learning (and learning about teaching and learning) that I see in Te Puna Ako and the Philosophy Programme to other parts of the university.

In addition to attending Teaching Advocate meetings and helping colleagues when asked, I have been investigating student

engagement. Later this year, I will present at LearnFest on what I think we need to do to get students engaged in their studies. I appreciate this platform because (as I will argue) increasing student engagement will require a university-wide effort.

I'm so proud that we are hosting LearnFest again. It is a truly vibrant and inspiring event that really seems to make a difference. For example, my talk at LearnFest last year about how to get students engaged in their reading is being distributed to other staff through the library.

I aim to continue to push myself. I want to keep learning about effective teaching. Inspired by Donella Cobb and others, I hope to one day to be good enough to win a national teaching excellence award.



The fruits of passion

Responses to "In what ways did this teacher help you learn?":

"...he is very passionate..."

"Enthusiasm for philosophy during lectures, it's contagious."

"I liked... how enthusiastic... he was"

"...lots of enthusiasm (even on Monday mornings)..."

"...very enthusiastic..." x2

"...great enthusiasm..."

"...always enthusiastic..."

"He had great enthusiasm..."

"He is enthusiastic..."

"...enthusiastic lecturer..."

"He was 100% engaging..."

"...engaging and interesting"

"...clearly enjoys teaching..."

"You can tell he really likes what he does..." x2

– PHIL106-17A Student feedback

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