

Teaching statement

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I am a philosopher of mind. I investigate the nature of the mind and the relationships between experience and abstract thought, and I often take inspiration from fields such as psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and artificial intelligence for both my research and teaching methods. One of the hardest problems in these disciplines is modeling the so-called ‘exploration-exploitation tradeoff’. This is the process through which repetitive habits are abandoned, and new behaviors or skills emerge to take their place in light of new needs or goals.

In the context of a philosophy course, my goal as an instructor is to guide students to recognize and make explicit their ideas, beliefs, and biases, and to question them in order to become more autonomous thinkers. Having little inclination to question the status quo and challenge widespread beliefs is a form of exploitation: we stay in our ‘intellectual comfort zone’, and we live our lives ‘on autopilot’, already knowing which results our repetitive choices and behaviors will obtain. However, challenges can unexpectedly emerge in our monotonous world, and relying on exploitation of the already known might be no longer enough to live a successful life: new events, ideas, and perspectives can be disruptive, and might call for explanations that are outside the domain of what’s known and familiar. As I see it, a philosophy course should help students become more comfortable with exploration, and less satisfied with ‘mere’ exploitation of the thoughts and beliefs they already have. I believe that the best way to achieve this is by stimulating students to ‘re-structure’ their thinking habits autonomously, through activities that make them engage creatively with what they are taught and encourage them to relate to it on a personal level.

In my courses, I like to have students articulate in their own words (i) what they think a particular claim or thesis means, and (ii) what kind of (good or bad) implications they think the claim has. Often, the claims I choose will be open to many interpretations, and their implications change depending on how the claim is contextualized. This generally has the effect of creating a perturbation in students’ mental ‘comfort zones’ and causes them to re-assess what they *really* think about a certain topic, as opposed to what they *believe they should* think. Course requirements always include preparing discussion questions about the assigned reading for the week. Such questions must not be merely clarificatory; they must touch on a substantive issue. Students should be able to articulate what they think the main issue in the reading is, whether it has any interesting implications, or whether it connects to other issues even external to the course. This exercise makes them ‘slow down’ and approach the material I assign them more as a prompt for original thought and less as a bunch of notions to learn. In philosophy, the main learning objective is to be able to first formulate one’s own questions and then answer them in an honest and reasoned way. It is not about ‘the right answer’; it is about the ‘right way’ to get to an answer.

When thinking about a particular theory or thesis, I encourage students to look at their own experiences, and imagine how an abstract idea can influence more concrete situations. For example, in the context of an Introduction to Philosophy of science, I ask my students to reflect on

how the very idea of ‘scientific truth’ is often tied to political and financial power. Is science always ‘objective’? Who decides what constitutes ‘scientific evidence’ for a claim? What does it mean to ‘trust’ or ‘believe in’ science? In small groups, students discuss examples from their own disciplines in which some scientific discovery or technological innovation has been evaluated differently depending on certain background assumptions or beliefs of the very group evaluating it. For instance, a pharmacology student pointed out how a new medication is more likely to be cleared by the FDA depending on which research lab works on it, and on who funds the research. Another student remembered how the Catholic Church opposed Galileo Galilei’s groundbreaking research in physics and astronomy because it was incompatible with a geocentric model of the universe.

Another pedagogical strategy I consider fundamental is inspired by the idea of ‘peer review’; I call it ‘peer instruction’. As part of their grade, students are usually required to ‘teach’ some material to their classmates, either by creating short presentations, or by assisting me in leading the class. I try to be as available as possible to meet with students either one-on-one or in small groups outside the classroom to provide direct feedback and guidance on their presentations, but once in the classroom, students are mostly in charge of communication. During peer instruction or open discussion moments, my primary role is to moderate and supervise dialogue, occasionally correcting the use of terminology or explicitly drawing attention to important points.

As a philosopher, I value the understanding of reality at the highest level of abstraction, but I also consider the ability to analyze and understand concrete everyday life situations an essential part of philosophical training. If even just one student decides that exploration is better than exploitation after taking my class, something important will have been accomplished.