

Teaching statement

Alessandra Buccella, Wesleyan University, 2020

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.

Exploration and exploitation are useful notions to understand what I take to be the main purpose of a philosophy course and, therefore, of my job as an instructor: to inspire and empower students to become more flexible and autonomous thinkers. Having little inclination to question the status quo and challenge widespread beliefs is a form of exploitation, and it captures the way we ordinarily go through our lives: we stay in our intellectual comfort zone, acting and thinking ‘on autopilot’, already knowing which results our repetitive choices and behaviors will obtain. Most of our lives are lived according to the principle: ‘If it has worked so far, why change it?’

However, challenges can unexpectedly emerge in our monotonous world, and relying on exploitation of what’s been working so far might be no longer enough to live a successful life: events, ideas, and perspectives can disrupt our habits and be in tension with how we have interpreted the world up to now. Just as we have been seeing with the coronavirus pandemic, new circumstances might call for novel explanations which require unfamiliar concepts and for new behaviors and practices to be learned from scratch. In other words, living a successful life sometimes requires abandoning exploitation and embrace exploration. Philosophy is one of the better-equipped academic disciplines to guide people in the transition from exploitation to exploration, whatever their motives may be. Indeed, philosophy courses have often the power to make students dissatisfied with ‘mere’ exploitation of thoughts, beliefs, and actions they are already accustomed to: philosophical questions and theories stretch the domain of the conceivable to its limits, encouraging us to follow along and be comfortable with reaching bold and perhaps surprising conclusions.

Thus, as a philosophy teacher, my main function is to introduce students to such bold and surprising ideas, and to give them the intellectual tools needed to truly appreciate and understand them. In my experience, the most effective way to fulfill this function is to create learning opportunities and activities through which students can explore new ideas in an autonomous way, without judgment and without expecting there to be a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to grasp an idea. In my courses, I like to have students articulate in their own words (i) what they think a particular claim or thesis means, (ii) what kind of (good or bad) implications they think the claim has, and (iii) whether what we are discussing has any connections with their personal experiences. Philosophical theses are often open to many interpretations, and their implications change depending on how the claim is contextualized and connected to someone’s personal experience.

In many cases, active interpretation exercises of this kind create 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.

Moreover, my courses often include among the requirements the formulation of discussion questions about the assigned reading for the week. Such questions must not be merely clarificatory; they must touch on a substantive issue. Through discussion questions, each student should be able to articulate what they think the most important idea conveyed by the reading is and whether it connects in interesting ways to other issues they are familiar with. The activity of formulating discussion questions forces them to 'slow down' and approach the course materials more as a prop for original and creative thinking 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 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 asked 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 discussed examples from their own major 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 Galileo Galilei's groundbreaking research in physics and astronomy wasn't considered 'real science' by the Catholic Church because it was incompatible with a geocentric model of the universe.

Another pedagogical strategy I consider fundamental in order to foster autonomous intellectual exploration 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 while they prepare for peer instruction, and once in the classroom, my primary role is to moderate and supervise dialogue, occasionally correcting the use of terminology or explicitly drawing attention to important points that are being touched. Other than that, students are free to choose how to communicate and help each other understand things, because moving from exploitation to exploration is easier and less intimidating if it is a team effort.