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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I used to think that my main job as a teacher was to transfer knowledge to my students, and that the best way to do that was to tell them what I know. My experience has taught me otherwise, as I have become fully convinced that skill building is the best means for effective learning. In my teaching, my main goal is therefore to challenge and encourage intellectual development through skill building. I take my main challenge to be that of motivating student activity and engagement. As research shows, proper motivation leads to increased engagement and better learning.[1] I approach this challenge with three main tools.

Class Environment

First and foremost, I take up what I like to call a 'practice first' approach, where I allow students to formulate their own ideas and thoughts on a particular matter by appealing to their own interests and lived experiences. For instance, I begin lectures by introducing a particular case that pertains to the learning material, and elicit student opinions, as well as their reasons for these opinions. This increases students' interest and engagement, as it allows them to approach the more abstract ideas and arguments more confidently. Overall, students have responded very well and have continuously made lively contributions to discussions. I also incorporate extra participation tools as possible such as weekly online discussions. This accommodates diverse learning styles and give students who are not comfortable speaking up in class a chance to enjoy philosophical discussion.

Low-Stakes Activities

Second, I create opportunities for students to succeed in small, low-stakes tasks that build their confidence and speak to their own views and interests, as well as develop their philosophical skills (e.g. argument reconstruction and evaluation, self-criticism, and communication). Normally I do this by using short in-class assignments. These assignments are not graded, and they may take up the form of 'food for thought' questions that do not rely on students' familiarity with or understanding of the learning material; or they can be aimed at developing and practicing their philosophical skills. Research has shown that these early, low-stakes experiences increase student motivation and consequently student learning,[2] and student feedback bears witness to this as well. Students have expressed overwhelming satisfaction with these tiny tasks and their contribution to their own motivation, engagement, and understanding.

These in-class assignments begin with an individual component where students write their own independent answers and continue with a group-discussion component: the class splits up into small groups, where students discuss what they wrote in the individual portion. This allows students to prepare themselves for class discussion when we regroup, increases participation, and provides them with challenging tasks such as justifying their own views and explaining their arguments to someone else. This also motivates students by offering them chances to exercise their philosophical skills without fear of penalty-by-grade. It increases motivation by providing

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[1] Ambrose, Susan A., Marsha Lovett, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, and Marie K. Norman. 2010. *How learning work: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley.

[2] Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works*; Bean, John C. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

students with early chances to experience success in the classroom through peer discussion, and my own encouraging reactions regarding the value of their ideas. The success of these strategies and practices is manifest in students' strong and positive responses. They also allow me to keep an eye on how students are doing throughout the course, so that I know what I need to focus on going from one lecture to the next.

High-Stakes Assignments

Third, I offer students the chance to repeatedly and gradually exercise important philosophical skills such as reading, writing, argumentation, and critical thought. One strategy I have used to this end is designing scaffolded assignments, where later assignments rely on skills practiced in earlier assignments (e.g. exegesis, then exegesis with objection, then exegesis with objection and response). In these assignments, students get to exhibit in a high-stakes setting the same skills they practiced in low-stakes tasks. As Lead Writing TA, I worked with other instructors, and saw how students react positively to this assignment structure in many courses.

Recently, I have introduced assignments based on peer-learning. In these assignments, students get to practice four important philosophical skills: exegesis and argument extraction, argument evaluation and formulation, objection, and response. Students submit a short summary with opinion, provide (anonymous) feedback on the work of their peers, and then respond to the comments they received. These exercises are not scaffolded. However, they provide students with short, manageable exercises that allow for repeated practicing of the same skills (exegesis, argumentation, objection, and response).

This strategy leads to substantial increase in student mastery of these skills. Students also experiencing how philosophy is actually done in academia (e.g. in departmental seminars, conferences, and journals). Students become much more engaged in philosophical discussions in class, as they progress through the course. By becoming personally involved in each other's success and familiar with others' work, students are more motivated to participate and learn how they can communicate their thoughts more clearly and accurately. Students have found these peer-learning activities.

Application and Conclusion

In the courses that I have taught and tutorials I've led, these practices have proven extremely helpful for me and for the students. In my Introduction to Ethics course, students had short assignments that were scaffolded and gradually shifted focus from some skills – such as argument extraction – to others – such as independent argument construction. Students found this very helpful. In my Business Ethics course, students found that the peer-learning exercises helped them understand what an argumentative assignment looks like. In tutorials, students found the in-class activities motivating and helpful for their understanding of the material.

I used to think that what was most important about teaching was the quantity of learning material I would cover in class. I've learned that what's most important is the quantity of high-quality learning with which I can provide students. By approaching teaching as first and foremost a task of motivating students and providing them with ample opportunities for practice, participation, and peer interaction, I have been able to observe a significant improvement in student learning – both in terms of understanding the course material, and in terms of their philosophical skills.