Cultivating transferable skills in philosophy undergraduates

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Introduction

"Since the late 1980s there has been a growing emphasis by government upon explicit skills or competencies development alongside the traditional focus on subject-specific content. This has been due to the desire to produce more 'real world' skills, such as oral communication, leadership and decision-making. This has been seen by some academic staff as an attack on the discipline, and there are indeed some dangers. But it has challenged tutors to articulate clearly what skills are developed in students by a humanities or social science degree -- what is important in their discipline." (Booth and Booth, p. 159)

Universities today no longer have reclusive self-propagation as their principal aim. Especially after the vast expansion of higher education in the 1960s, only a small minority of the new universities' graduates continue their studies to a doctorate and subsequent employment in the same university system as a 'scholar' or, less traditionally, 'researcher' (how the connotations of that first word have changed!). Universities, funded throughout most of the world by state money, now have a more broadly educational function, in the sense of being a non-compulsory extension of the primary and secondary school systems, for the non-scholarly elites of the future. Even though subsidised university is now available to many, it is a mark of the new moneyed leisure that so many can and are willing to postpone the beginning of their productive life, especially when their interest in the explicit subject matter of their chosen discipline is often inchoate at best.

As such, university departments now aim to provide far more than the core information that would have been demanded by the future scholars of yesteryear. Indeed, it could be argued that the subject matter is merely a vehicle by which to convey a set of skills deemed important for the future elite, a set that modern business and government cannot afford to spend time developing in their new recruits. The question then arises about the degree to which the university should accept this development and strive more systematically and consistently to cultivate these secondary skills, and the degree to which it should resist in the spirit of its original non-vocational calling.

The contours of this debate are all the more striking in the university subject of philosophy. Philosophy has a rather odd status among the core disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. On the one hand, it could claim to be the oldest, having once encompassed all modern fields of enquiry, including what we now call physics and mathematics; it was simply the 'love of wisdom' where such wisdom pertained to the entire human endeavour. Nowadays, however, the British secondary schools with philosophy in their curriculum can be counted on one hand; and university philosophy departments, some of them closing down (e.g. Newcastle and Exeter, to name but two
recent examples), must assume their new first-year students to have no formal training, even in argumentative logic or critical thinking. In passing, this dearth is in marked contrast to neighbouring France, where, as far as I know, philosophy is a compulsory subject for every 18-year-old writing the national baccalaureate exam -- but then again, the public stereotype of the swinging cafe philosopher was always more appealing than that of the stuffy Oxbridge don.

At the same time, philosophy claims to be the 'purest' of disciplines, at least in theory, in that it relies far less on palpable, given facts or on ever-developing knowledge and expertise, than any other discipline. The ancient philosophers may be studied as a closed and dusty history of who said what when; but the normal approach in the English-speaking world is to see the author in question as suggesting something, perhaps only in outline, and indeed suggesting it here and now as if he were a colleague ("I say, Immanuel, you're looking a bit pale, but your arguments are full of life"). And we may then enter a dialogue with him (and very occasionally with her), refuting his one move, anticipating his rebuttal, all in a search for some better way to deal with a plethora of persistent mysteries. For the one fact of philosophy, if you like, is that there are no facts, no unimpeachable beliefs, no sacred truths, no infallible prophets; everything can and must be questioned in the name of some elusive higher truth. The ancient philosophers are certainly consulted for their opinions, but they will 'inevitably' turn out to be wrong in most of what they claim; after all, while we cannot answer all their questions we can question all their answers. Nevertheless, they can still be greatly admired for their insights and broad approaches to problems that stymied their predecessors and for their novel way of formulating the problem as a challenge for their successors. But the great problems of philosophy remain essentially the same now as they appeared to Plato, and countless number of ingenious solutions reveal not only just how intractable they are, but how fundamental they are to the way perceive the world and our place in it.

This could lead to pedantry and self-indulgence; the persistent sophist or sceptic is unlikely to very popular at the more fashionable parties, and we may again pity the aforementioned Oxbridge don. It is also unlikely that philosophers are very happy people, or very practical people of action. Sometimes their philosophy is downright dangerous, whatever the noble intentions of a theory's progenitor. But here I would stress that nowadays very few philosophy students become professional philosophers, and indeed, it could be said that real philosophers, if true to their principles (and perhaps independently wealthy), would eschew the modern academy in preference of sackcloth and sandals for their life of contemplation.

In smaller doses, however, I believe a philosophical training can provide the best sort of education and the best package of transferable skills a state's money can buy. True, a philosopher might not be able to follow the intricacies of international politics or of the dot.com revolution like her more learned fellow-graduates in politics, finance and computer science. But, once the details of this or that problem are acquired independently of any systematic training, it will be the philosophically-developed skills that allow her best to deal with such a problem -- to her own and to society's overall benefit.[2]

The primary and secondary skills

This introduction was important to set the philosophical training in its proper context; for the skills provided are not arbitrary in the sense of being responses to a need generated by this or that human activity, such as the skill to repair a car. Rather, in a broadly Aristotelian conception of human well-being, they are skills that are essentially required by rational human beings to function as such, whatever else they do; they cannot be taught directly as car repair can, so much as cultivated with only a minimal reference to overarching goals; and they are supremely 'transferable', to use the odious modern bureaucratic parlance to which philosophers have a more healthy disdain than most. As such the modern tutor has moved on from being merely a subject expert to being a 'learning facilitator' (avaunt, oh rude jargon!), helping students to learn the subject directly, but especially to learn these skills indirectly. It is now time to take a look at these skills, and to ask about the methods used by the present philosophical discipline to teach and assess them in their students. Before I continue, however, I want to stress one crucial distinction: a philosopher studies philosophy as part of her search for truth and wisdom within a particular intellectual tradition, and not to cultivate these skills; a general student, who is still unsure of her interests, should be encouraged to study
philosophy because of the skills the command of which she will thereby improve -- regardless of whether she enjoys
the subject or is interested in the truths and wisdoms it offers her. In this essay I am writing as a philosopher about
general students, a philosopher, moreover, who believes in the importance of widely developing the skills without
necessarily trying to measure and assess such development in the inevitably clumsy ways of the new teaching
quality assessors.

I propose to divide the skills into primary and secondary. Due to a lack of space, I do not plan to deal with secondary
skills too much in this essay; these are such skills associated with studying, and studying any subject -- helping
students to learn information more effectively. Any institutional curriculum will cultivate such skills by giving the
students a carrot and stick motivation to practice their development. These skills are no less important than primary
skills for orienting oneself in any complex institutional framework into which most students continue after graduation,
albeit in return for sweeter remuneration. Such skills include time management (meeting deadlines, working under
stress, organising work schedules etc.), use of information technology and other tools now indispensable in the
workplace, networking with peers and impressing superiors, training certain types of memory, decision-making, self-
reliance and confidence, a sensitivity to power structures relationships, and how to negotiate them to one's
advantage. Philosophy is probably less successful than other disciplines in encouraging other secondary skills such
as teamwork, opportunism, self-interested negotiation and self-promotion. These last three, however, are clearly not
unambiguous virtues, and philosophy will encourage a more reflective hesitation in letting one's natural self-interest
override in matters of principle. With respect to the skill of teamwork (including trust and reciprocity), however,
modern philosophy is admittedly less encouraging than it should be, preferring to promote a rugged individualism in
the face of a no doubt exaggerated threat of irrational social persuasion and coercion. Certainly, teaching philosophy
could and should adopt more group work, for example to the degree considered normal in the collaboration-based
laboratory sciences.

What are the primary skills of interest to teachers of philosophy, then? I could make a list, as do the standard
textbooks on the subject:

- **problem-solving.** Philosophy is about problems. Not only the means-end problems of most disciplines, but
the much more intractable problems that cannot so much as be solved as only dealt with. For most often there
simply is no uncontroversial solution of the kind often available to mathematicians, or of the kind justified by
sufficient reasons and calculations and evidence as in economics. But philosophy can alert one to the hidden
complexity of a problem, can expose the unjustified assumptions and undesirable implications of otherwise
elegant solutions, and can draw useful contrasts between different types or structures of problems.

- **analysis** (criticism, interpretation, synthesis, extraction of key ideas and arguments from a text). A
philosopher has to learn how to wade through the irrelevant adornments of a text to the marrow of the
argument, she has to discover as quickly as possible what the main claims of a text are (and by extension,
those of her own work during the all-important revision process). To this end, philosophers often use a formal
propositional language to summarise arguments, allowing for greater clarity when challenging particular
premises (including those insidiously tacit or hidden premises) and conclusions. Most importantly, philosophers
are wary of simplistic solutions, and will always test the entailments, presuppositions and counter-intuitive
implications of a given theory; they will be sensitive to the complexity of experienced life and moral intuitions
(as focused by well-chosen examples), to context and to the differing points of view (not in the sense of mere
opinion, but of the way of seeing the world) of the respective adherents. These last points are part of what
Gibbs and Habeshaw (1996, p. 7) refer to as the ‘Big Picture’, and it is vital that this be repeatedly
communicated to and understood by the students.

- **justification of argument.** Opinions and beliefs cannot be held on whim or instinct in philosophy, but must
be justified, and this relentless process of justification will expose many unfounded assertions and dogma and
prejudice hidden in arguments. Justification involves a belief in universal standards of rationality, from which
we are all too prone to slip, be it out of intellectual laziness or expediency; we seek not only to
persuade another person, but our own idealised selves of what is true, and therefore of what ought to be
believed.

- **communication (verbal and written)** (listening, questioning, presentation of ideas, persuasion). It might be argued that communication is a secondary skill, appropriate for all disciplines. But my placing it among the primary skills reflects the importance that philosophers give to it. Communicating well is fundamental to philosophy, since clear communication directly reflects clarity of thought as opposed to mere regurgitation. A subject such as history has a certain amount of information that has to be taken as given and conveyed before the interesting business of interpretation can begin; philosophy has much less of such information, and so it can move from conveyance to communication earlier. Communication also involves analysis and attempted justification of one's own thoughts before they are communicated, analysis of others' arguments in an effort to understand what exactly they are saying and especially of what they are trying to say: by seeking to understand where one's interlocutor is coming from and where she is trying to go we may join her in the enterprise.

- **practical judgement and wisdom.** I give three English words as clumsy translations of the ancient Greek word *phronesis*. This skill differs from all the others because it is hardest to teach directly or even indirectly in the sense we have been looking at. No philosophy department, or any other university department, for that matter, will state among its aims that it wishes to make its students wiser; indeed, there are no textbooks on how to become wise, no Nobel Prizes in wisdom, no way a bright teenager can learn the ropes. Indeed, it is not really a skill at all, but rather an attitude to life and to oneself, and as such it can probably only be gained with enough experience of a certain richness. Nevertheless, I would argue that philosophers are more sensitive to the importance of judgement, even if they do not and perhaps cannot cultivate it directly. Perhaps the first four primary skills, when honestly practised over the course of many years, will be more likely to result in wisdom. This results in a type of integrity, based on an compromising respect for the truth. As such it belongs on this list, if only because it was the supreme 'skill' of Plato's Academy (although he would not have recognised our word 'skill' in its modern guise). The rest of this essay, however, will deal mainly with the first four primary skills.

### Teaching methods

Now that we have some vague initial idea of these four (five) very complicated skills, let us look at the way that a university department, and in particular the philosophy department, aims to cultivate them in its undergraduate students. The standard loci for teaching and learning are the following:

- **lectures.** This is a modern invention to deal with the great numbers that are now being subsidised through all university departments. It is particularly inappropriate for philosophy, which by its nature is an intimate and interactive discipline which cannot be easily conveyed through space. Lectures usually have a more important secondary purpose, and that is to organise a student's week, compensate for the reading they can no longer be expected to do (a classic example of where colluding with a necessary evil ends up condoning and encouraging it), and arguably provides a forum for all like-minded students to assemble. It also provides the basic core information and core structure to which all tutorials may consistently refer (and the lecturer then becomes arbiter in conflicts about policy or content).

- **seminars and tutorials.** This is the ideal teaching environment for philosophy, with the smaller the group that a department can afford, the better. Reading and writing, while much more important in the long term in developing the four primary skills, require a parallel social and verbal element for a full balance. Verbal self-expression tends to be much more difficult, especially in front of critical and philosophically astute peers. There is also a crucial social element, which, while directly fostering much-needed secondary skills, is particularly beneficial for a philosopher to bring her down to earth, to remind her that her grand metaphysical theories are not to be applied to such an abstract (and therefore uncomplaining) entity as 'humanity', but to the complex beings she beholds before her; she is thus forced to place greater trust in her intuitions, even when
challenging them. The metaphysical temptation is a constant danger in French-style philosophy, and indeed in the natural sciences everywhere, where problems are reduced to mere tests of one’s egostic ingenuity. Real philosophy is not so much about the world around us and detached from us, but about our world and the limits of our experience and understanding.

- **reading.** At the end of the day, there is never any substitute for wide reading, and this will apply to all disciplines. The distinctive feature of philosophy, however, is that the informational value of the text is less important than the exposure to skilled argument and reasoning. As such it is far more important for a philosophy student to be assigned only 20 pages a week to be read twice, and in depth, as opposed to being assigned 100 pages of history or literature to be skimmed through. This is not only a matter of the distinct jargon that has to be learned and manipulated with confidence, but more importantly a question of getting slowly accustomed to the disciplinary standards of rigour and argument. Philosophers wrestle with a text rather than merely absorbing it (Gibbs and Habeshaw (1996, p. 6) speak of ‘constructing knowledge’ rather than ‘recording it like a tape-recorder’). The emphasis is always on understanding what was said and defining one’s own position -- which may be or become diametrically opposed -- in relation to it. After her undergraduate training, a philosophy graduate may well forget all the details of Descartes’s method of doubt as applied to the problems Descartes was trying to solve; but she will never forget the method itself.

- **preparation for exams.** Like lectures, exams are a regrettable modern invention to deal with the mass popularity of philosophy departments (usually the largest alongside History and English Literature among the humanities). Arguably, these foster many secondary skills such as short-term memory, working under pressure, and organising one’s thoughts into a tight space. However, they represent everything that philosophers traditionally fight against: rote learning, regurgitation, filling in gaps, stock responses, allowing students to be processed with a minimum of effort and a maximum of superficial fairness on the institution’s part. It is argued that the preparatory reading is the important part of the exam system, but I would argue that such reading can never be philosophical, since it quickly becomes reading for mere information. (see below for discussion on the assessment function of exams).

- **writing.** Finally, this is the core of the modern teaching and assessment of philosophy. At some point, the seminar ends and the reading must stop and the philosopher has to write something. A philosophy essay is unlike any other piece of writing elsewhere in the university, since it stands or falls on the basis of its central argument, its ‘angle’ on the problem. Facts and empirical data are entirely secondary, and first-year students always have to be told not to mention any details about Hume’s personal background. This encourages a purity, an avoidance of ornamental waffle, in philosophical writing. Students are told to ‘get on with it’, to declare their intentions clearly and forcefully all the way through their essay, and to anticipate criticisms to and to acknowledge weaknesses of their argument. Ideally, the student will submit a first draft for comments from her tutor, which will allow her to trim even more extraneous material and reorganise the components for maximum clarity and force (see my comments about drafts in the section on ‘Assessment’, below).

There have been complaints, as elsewhere in the university and throughout society, that philosophy’s over-reliance on writing (again, a modern phenomenon, especially facilitated by information technology) generates little more than textual diarrhoea. Words, words, words, everywhere one turns, and students are indirectly encouraged to develop skills of filling space, ‘making the word-count’, picking even more nits for the sake of doctoral originality. Alas, academic philosophy does suffer from this too, and the lives of professional philosophers the world over has been exacerbated by this sort of ‘publish or perish’ mentality. Nevertheless, I like to think there are still standards between a good essay and a bad essay, and that philosophy students can be taught more effectively than most the sensitivity required to tell the difference, so that they will be able to later refrain from writing when they have nothing to say.[7]

Finally, philosophy encourages essays written in **dialectical** style. Rather than the standard comparative structure, where two theories are compared for plausibility, or two solutions to a single problem are compared for effectiveness and comprehensiveness,[8] philosophy essays will typically begin with such an approach, only to move on to the
more important dialectic between the author and another philosopher's real and imagined claims -- the classic Socratic dialogue. This appreciation of the dialectic is itself a significant transferable skill, not for the banal reason of encouraging toleration of dissent and disagreement, but because of the collaborative drive to bring different points of view to bear for a fuller understanding of a single truth.

Assessment

Finally, a word about the contentious subject of assessment, and its targeted use in cultivating transferable skills among philosophy undergraduates. As with many other disciplines there are two dicta relevant to this section. The first is that "unassessed essays are seldom written" (Gibbs, Habeshaw 1996, p. 11), and the second is the famous Law of Effect: "it is hard to make headway in any kind of learning tasks if you do not have a firm impression of how well you are doing" (Forster, Hounsell p. 51). "How well one is doing" would seem to refer to the first type of assessment, formative assessment (or assessment-for-learning). This involves providing valuable feedback and diagnosis to the student during the learning process to assure her that she is 'on the right track' and to motivate her to further efforts; an essential part of such assessment, of course, is detail about what she is getting right and where she has misunderstood the assignment. The other type of assessment, summative assessment (or assessment-for-grading), involves the question of achievement of some set of objective standards ('criterion-referenced') or ranking ('norm-referenced')[9] that will be intelligible both to the student as well as to all individuals beyond the assessing institution whom the student may contact. These two types of assessment will often overlap, of course, such as when an essay is returned with a numerical mark (mainly summative but also formative unless it somehow marks the end of the student's career studying that discipline) and comments (formative -- if sufficiently detailed and constructive).

As I mentioned above, the installation of end-of-year essays has proved highly destructive to philosophy and to the cultivation of transferable skills through philosophy. The practical considerations that may have some force in the sciences are feeble when applied to the distinctive content and method of philosophy. In addition, the fact that the exam produces the sole summative numerical assessment in the first two years shifts the centre of gravity away from classroom discussion and thorough essay construction to intense cramming sessions based on ridiculously-condensed study notes on the subject. This has the undesired effect of increasing the stress associated with assessment mechanisms themselves as well as giving too undue an importance to factors of shear luck or certain dispositional weaknesses entirely unrelated to the student's future success in the discipline. Finally, exams encourage a "creeping instrumentalist" approach to one's studies, whereby the ultimate purpose of all activity is to gain marks (Gibbs and Habeshaw 1996, p. 11).

What I would advocate is a return to the essay as the fundamental unit of assessment, perhaps supported by an assessment of classroom participation, but there I would hesitate, since natural shyness can persistently conceal bold philosophical talent -- all-important verbal skills would be better to assess in one-on-one sessions with the tutor, if necessary. In terms of essay-writing, the Oxbridge system, from what I have heard of it, is truly the ideal that all institutions should aim for, as far as their funded teaching-hours will allow them. Submission and feedback, submission and feedback, and a summative assessment extended to include a large sample of submitted work, thus making up for natural wavering in performance. Ideally, many of the essays could also be compulsorily submitted in draft form, to be returned with detailed notes by the tutor.[10] But instead of the comments being appreciated on a shoulder-shrugging basis with the words "okay, fair enough, I'll try and remember that next time", the student is required to deal with the comments when revising the draft. This revision is extremely important on its own, of course, and students are all too tempted to "get the thing out of the way" by submitting it without letting it brew for a couple of days. A compulsory first draft forces them to revise, and to fill in the gaps and anticipate the objections highlighted by the tutor, resulting in a much better final essay. It is my experience that the period between draft and final submissions is the most intensive learning experience for the student.[11]

Conclusion

Throughout the above processes, the student should be informed of the skills that are thereby to be imparted, that she might reflect on the process of learning itself, and become co-responsible for the outcome and for her decision to
remain in the programme. More generally, this is one of the key aspects of active learning of both of the subject matter and the skills. Often the student may wonder about the point of studying this or that arcane branch of epistemology, and she needs a secondary set of reasons to fall back on, to wit, the epistemology unit being a vehicle for the development of her mind and of her transferable skills. This will contribute to meeting the student's on-going search for personal and academic meaning in what is, after all, a major activity in her life.[12] It is again important to remember that I have been discussing the general student, still unsure of her interests and goals. If she does in time discover an interest in the subject itself, then she will obviously no longer require the above incentives. Indeed, if and when she comes to see herself as a philosopher, then she will reject such a rationale as inevitably false, since by its very nature philosophy can have no purpose.

We might call this the procreative dilemma: the practitioners must reluctantly invent and publicly promote a purpose or rationale in order to attract enough initial commitment among non-practitioners to provide for the next generation, as well as to attract enough commitment among administrative and funding bodies to continue existing at all. What is distinctive and, I argue, healthy about philosophers is that they will feel this to be, at least sometimes, a pandering betrayal of their love of wisdom.

Bibliography


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Footnotes

1. This is a revised version of an essay submitted to the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol as a component of the requirements of a postgraduate teacher training certificate. I wish to thank Jeff Goodman for his helpful comments.

2. Two comments are relevant here, based on my own experience. I have been teaching two tutorials this year, one to a grouped of first-years from other departments taking introductory philosophy as a subsidiary subject, the other a core second-year ethics tutorial. Since the first-years will not be continuing their study of philosophy, I am particularly sensitive to the skills they are acquiring in the process of learning a content that is not of primary interest to them. With the ethics tutorial, I am also sensitive to the another set of skills above and beyond the sets of transferable skills described in this essay: and these are the skills involved in behaving properly and becoming a good person. I am particularly eager to prevent discussions about ethics from 'deteriorating' into abstract metaphysical debates devoid of all application on the students’ own lives outside the institution.

3. Apart from various group exercises within the tutorial, the best way I have found to foster teamwork is to demand the preparation of joint discussion-leading. Students are paired off and asked to prepare a discussion on the lectures of a given week, and encouraged to meet outside of the tutorial to plan it.
4. The textbooks consulted have various taxonomies. The most useful I found was that of Booth and Booth, p. 83. However, I disagree with them in their placing "organisational skills" and "collaborative skills (working together, negotiation, tolerance)" on a par with analytical and communicative skills.

5. I stress, as before, that I am only discussing the Anglo-American university departments, since it seems that philosophy teaching is much different in mainland Europe, not to mention further east where the traditional academic disciplines may also be divided up in ways very different from those of the West.

6. Adapted from Forster, Hounsell, Thompson, p. 6

7. A noble sentiment; but what if they will lose their job for so refraining?

8. Adapted from Baume and Baume, *Making Presentations*, p. 7

9. See the taxonomy of assessment in Booth and Booth, p. 158

10. Even though the human contact associated with the delivery of verbal comments is important, I advocate written comments because they can be re-read, they can be more critical without so directly threatening the student’s dignity, and they can be re-consulted later on when following up longer-term strategies. Very often an efficient choice of words or a bang-on description will 'stick' more when read *and re-read*.

11. In passing, one exercise I have also tried successfully is to have students mark each others’ essays, where both the author and the reviewer are kept strictly anonymous. This is only feasible after the students have written one or two essays and received detailed feedback on them. Articulating dissatisfaction with the work of one’s peers allows the student greater sensitivity to a set of inchoate standards of good essay-writing which she can then apply to her own work.

12. This paragraph was inspired by a list in Booth and Booth p. 129.