Philosophical Transformation: A Teaching Philosophy

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One semester in a feminist philosophy course, I assigned a controversial article that argued that all men bear some collective responsibility for the perpetuation of rape culture. Since one major assignment of the course was a daily journal entry before class, I walked into class that morning knowing in advance how overwhelmingly opposed many students were to even discussing the central claim. Most flatly rejected the thesis as implausible, a good number took the thesis to be something like "all men are rapists," and several students were angry and defensive.

As I thought about my lesson plan in light of my overall objectives for the course, I decided that a change was in order. My overarching teaching goal is fostering authentic philosophical transformation for my students so that the questions, ideas, and methods students learn in the classroom begin to shape the way they think and live their lives outside of the classroom. With this in mind, I canceled the next reading and began by asking students to articulate their objections to the article, pushing them to show textual evidence for their interpretations. As they did, we collectively reconstructed the arguments together, claim by claim. At the next class, with students now better able to appreciate the arguments, we moved on to the question of whether the claims were compelling. By the end of the second class, few students were convinced by the thesis, but most students expressed that they now understood the arguments and saw why someone else might find them compelling. Since I think that truly educating students does not only result in their command of course content, but also in transforming ways of thinking, both about the content itself and about its implications for the larger world, I was satisfied that sacrificing course content to slow down was the right call.

While constructing an ethical identity is perhaps the most obvious examples of how philosophy can be transformative, philosophy may shape beliefs and actions in a variety of ways. For example, a student's assessment of arguments about implicit bias may affect the certainty with which she draws conclusions about the intentions or actions of others, her considered view on the nature of free will and moral responsibility may influence the way she thinks about punishment as a political tool, or Plato's arguments about the corruption of constitutions may lead her to evaluate democracy in a different light. This requires practice in understanding arguments, engaging charitably and critically, and reflecting about their own lives. To cultivate this, my approach emphasizes the importance of participating in shared philosophical conversation together and modeling for my students how to analyze, question, and critique. Through the slow and sometimes painful process of investigating both the text's and my own students' arguments, we practice doing philosophy together, not only learning about philosophical topics.

Although I have end goals in mind for each class, I encourage students to bring their questions, reflections, and objections to bear as well. I take student contributions seriously because beliefs and assumptions must be voiced before they can be examined. Moreover, working together to reconstruct arguments, consider evidence, and develop objections emphasizes that philosophy is

not something that can be done from the sidelines. As conversational partners, we all have a responsibility to participate in pushing the discussion forward in the classroom.

To facilitate this dialogue, I frequently begin class by framing the conversation, connecting the text to previous readings and overall themes, explaining content that enables students to better understand the text, and providing frameworks and questions to structure and stimulate thinking. I teach students explicitly about argument construction and techniques for effectively reading philosophy to foster the development of careful and critical engagement. I also design assignments so that they build on one another, first focusing on interpretation before turning to assignments that require students to construct their own arguments. For example, an early assignment in my Ethics course is producing an imagined written philosophical conversation between two philosophers. This assignment expects careful explication and understanding of what (for example) Aristotle might say to Mill, but does not require students to argue for their own positions yet. As students become more proficient, focus turns to argument development and application.

Development of students' own arguments happens through critical reflection. In my Feminist Philosophy course, students engaged with the texts in journal entries daily before class, and after class, reflected on their before-class entry in light of the class discussion. This could take one of several forms, such as diagnosing where their interpretation of the text before class went wrong, expanding a classmate's comment, or developing a response to an objection. As a number of students wrote in their final journal assessment, this encouraged them to explicitly recognize and correct mistakes in reasoning, connect their thoughts to an ongoing conversation, and self-reflect.

A second way that I encourage critical reflection is through evaluation of realistic problems. For example, in my Medical Ethics course, students are assigned to a team that acts as an ethics consulting team that must discuss a realistic medical case, come to a decision about what the right thing to do is, and write a brief explaining the ethical considerations raised by the case and the decision. Engagement with realistic cases is another way of encouraging the learning inside the classroom to influence students outside of the classroom.

Of course, I do not expect philosophical transformation to fit neatly within the confines of a semester, nor do I expect every student will be motivated to change. Any lasting commitment must come from an authentic and autonomous choice on the part of the student, which requires the student to take philosophical development to be something important to her own values and conception of self. But what I can do is encourage students to begin this process within the course and equip them with the tools to continue this work after the semester has ended. I do this through designing classroom activities that raise questions about personal values and beliefs, providing structure to help students to explain their views, and challenging students to assess them. For instance, the final part of the Feminist Philosophy journal assignment asked students to evaluate what they had learned over the course of the semester, how they had changed, and how they viewed their ongoing development in light of the course. While it is up to the individual students to integrate this into their own lives, this assignment stimulates the sort of reflection that makes philosophical transformation possible.