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Teaching Philosophy

I would argue that all good teaching is “learning-focused,” and I will consequently address this essay to the topic of what constitutes being learning-focused, with a particular emphasis on how I implement this philosophy in my own teaching.

I would argue that a learning-focused course may be defined as having two components: (1) class time is devoted to activities that help students learn, and (2) the course is designed to facilitate learning. I will therefore attempt to divide this essay into two parts, one focusing on how I run class sessions and the other on how I structure my courses as a whole, though of necessity my treatment will to some extent merge these topics. Numbered subsections will hopefully make the flow of my argument easier to follow.

(1) Class sessions. I think it is a general rule that students only learn when they are active agents; learning by osmosis doesn’t work, though it would be nice if it did. Sometimes learning is so easy that it scarcely seems like work, and certainly some students learn more easily than others. But learning is an active process even when it seems automatic. In contrast, there is no similar rule connecting faculty labor to student learning – sometimes students will learn by themselves, and faculty only need to step in periodically to monitor their progress; other times, faculty have to really labor to help students learn. This is a contrast that I think it is hard for faculty, and the general public, to fully appreciate, even though it may sound obvious when stated in the abstract.

So, what does this mean in practice? What does a learning-focused classroom look like? Since I will have to rely on my own experiences, this essay will consider only the kinds of courses that I have taught. Mostly I have taught core humanities subjects – philosophy, classics, religious studies, and history – and I tend to teach all these disciplines similarly.

(1a) Lecture. As a rule, lecturing doesn’t work. This seems counterintuitive for two reasons: first, because presenting a good lecture feels so satisfying from the perspective of the professor. But since professorial satisfaction is irrelevant to the question of student learning, this is not a useful criterion and it should be ignored. However, I am willing to accept that sometimes lecturing is necessary. In Penn’s writing program, we had a rule of thumb (which I became adept at following) that we should lecture for no more than 5 minutes at a time, and this either to introduce a topic for students, when intervention in student work seemed necessary, or in response to questions. Some courses probably require more lecturing than others, and different portions of a single course may require very different densities of lecturing, but the five-minute rule may be a good target in most courses provided it is not followed rigidly.

(1b) Discussion. So-called discussion-based courses rarely work. Often “discussion” is really used to mean “lecture with some student interaction.” Bean (in his *Engaging Ideas*) cites studies in which instructors leading discussion periods talked as much as 86% of the time; even

at its best, a discussion will be dominated by a few students, and for the rest the course effectively becomes a multi-lecturer class.

(1c) Course Goals Determine Activities. If students only learn when they are active, then classroom activities should allow all students to be doing things at least most of the time. Of course, constant activity by itself doesn't guarantee learning: instruction should focus on activities that target the kind of learning that students are expected to do. I think the main purpose of a philosophy course should be to enable students to think philosophically, and for the most part it should address traditional philosophical topics. I don't have the space here to characterize what "thinking philosophically" amounts to, so let it suffice to say that any discipline relies particularly on certain modes of thought, and philosophy is no exception. In classics and religious studies courses, I think one main goal should be to expand students' cultural perspectives, that is, help them understand how it is possible for people to hold views and live lives very different from their own. Sometimes this is also a goal in philosophy courses, but it need not be.

(2) Course Structure. What does all this mean for how a learning-focused course is structured? I am fortunate that in the disciplines I have taught there is no fixed content that needs to be covered. Two introductory courses in philosophy can have no topics or readings in common, whereas it is hard to imagine this to be the case for an introductory course in, say, mechanics or finance. This means that the main learning goals for my courses can focus on skills development rather than content, and content can be selected with an eye to my audience's preferences and interests.

The learning goals for a course should dictate all aspects of course design. If I want students to develop certain skills (for example, to appreciate how other people might be able to hold certain views, or to develop an argument-driven essay), then I need to provide students with the opportunity to practice these skills. You wouldn't want to lecture on the biomechanics of a bench press, then for the final exam put students on a bench with a 225 pound barbell: you need to let them practice first, and do so with smaller weights, building up to the goal. Similarly, a philosophy professor needs to provide low- as well as high-stakes opportunities to practice philosophical reasoning and the development of argumentative essays, scaffolding assignments as necessary to help students develop complex skills in stages.

(2a) Assessment of Learning. In practice, I have tended more and more towards having in-class, short-essay exams serve as the highest-stakes assessments in my courses. Why in-class? I prefer to get as much student work as possible in electronic form, but it is a well-established fact that cheating is rampant in higher education institutions of every type, and the only way I feel confident my students are doing their own work is to watch them do it. Why short essays? First, because the kinds of skills my courses target tend to require students to develop arguments, so the essay format is appropriate; and second, because my students have enough trouble with short essays, and I think that the long essay requires the ability to write a short essay, plus other skills. Until they master the short essay, there is no need to jump to the long form.

The problem with asking students to write essays in class is that performance is better when students have time to revise their work, so now I give students essay questions ahead of time. Since students have enough trouble memorizing definitions and names, I am not worried they will memorize essays written by others, and since one standard I use in grading is whether the author expresses ideas clearly, a poorly memorized essay will receive a low grade in any case. I encourage students to write drafts of essay answers when preparing for exams, and they tell me this provides them with incentive to study harder.

(2b) Choice of Activities. The learning goals for my course and the type of exam I assign therefore dictate how I structure a course. I choose appropriate content, but the content doesn't dictate the goals of the course; rather, the goals of the course set constraints on what content I select, along with other constraints such as, for example, the need to cover certain periods or events in a history survey course. I have begun moving towards a "flipped" format in which I record lectures and post them online. Class time is then left free for reading, writing and revision, and discussion. Let me discuss each of these in turn.

Reading in class largely consists of reading other students' writing, for example short essay answers written for homework or sentences or paragraphs written in class. But if I want students to discuss or write about a short text, perhaps a page or less, then often I simply assign it during class, giving students 5 or 10 minutes to read it. Then I can have them write about it immediately, or as a class we can discuss reading strategies, or the content or interpretation of the passage. It may seem odd to have students read in class, but if this facilitates learning, I see no reason to avoid it.

Reading and writing may be done either in class or for homework, depending on what works best for a given assignment. Sometimes discussions can be conducted asynchronously, for example on discussion boards, and sometimes lectures can be delivered in class, but in general there is a best place for these: lectures can be listened to alone, but discussions are best conducted synchronously, and either face-to-face or with appropriate support (with access to electronic whiteboards, for example).

(2c) Allocation of Labor. In such a course, the bulk of the instructor's labor is conducted outside of class, in preparing lectures and detailed lesson plans. During class I set assignments in motion, then monitor and intervene as needed.

I find that producing digital lectures is a very time-consuming process, since I carefully draft and revise the text of my lectures before recording them, and I edit my audio before producing finished lectures. I also prefer short lectures that facilitate active listening. I have a lecture on my website that explains my pedagogical and instructional design choices (seaquist.us/philosophy/Lectures/index.htm).

I periodically update my website (www.seaquist.us/courses.html) with artifacts from my courses, and I hope these provide a useful window into my teaching.