

CHANGING THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION WITH AN EDUCATION IN PHILOSOPHY

Chris Ryan

Secondary school students are often portrayed as honest do-gooders or apathetic misanthropes. Given the right set of parameters, a group of students can defy these stereotypes and learn about the nature of humanity and a great deal about themselves. The New Brunswick Philosophy 120 curriculum and instructional practices is an example of how it is possible, within the existing school system, to allow students to engage in deep learning about themselves and their world. If done correctly, the long term benefits will be a citizenry that is more prepared to take on the challenges of a complex global society.

In order to accomplish the goal of having students learn deeply about themselves and their world, as instructor of this course I needed to shift from a teacher led content delivery model to a student based skill development model. This meant developing an assessment strategy that relied heavily on feedback to help students grow without attaching a mark to student progress. A byproduct of this strategy is that students take ownership of their learning because of the flexibility in learning topics and modes of expression.

This paper showcases the pedagogical and assessment approaches I used in Philosophy 120 to guide student learning. I present this philosophy of education as a contrast to the pervasive philosophy I witness in both the secondary and post-secondary systems that are driven by test results and grade point averages.

Genesis of Philosophy 120

In 2009 the province of New Brunswick moved towards incorporating 21st Century Learning skills across the curriculum, as outlined by Trilling and Fadel.¹ At the same time, many educators in the province were exposed to the work of Anne Davies and Ken O'Connor. Davies identifies the difference between assessment and evaluation. "When teachers assess they are gathering information about student learning...When teachers evaluate, they decide whether or not students have learned."² O'Connor suggests teachers not "...summarize evidence accumulated over time when

¹ Trilling, Bernie and Charles Fadel. "21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times." (Jossey-Bass. 2009), 175.

² Davies, Anne, Sandra Herbst, and Beth Parrott Reynolds. "Leading the Way to Making Classroom Assessment Work." (Connections Publishing Inc, 2008), 1.

learning is developmental and will grow with time...”³ and points out that “...students play a key role in assessment and grading that promote achievement.”⁴ It is within this context that a Philosophy 120 course was conceived and created.

The designing of Philosophy 120 incorporated the above ideas, and in doing so challenged aspects of the status quo. Established educational practices around collection of marks and reporting needed to change as well as the parameters of the course related to deadlines and student choice.

Course Design

The course outcomes are given to the students in detail so that they can select specific aspects they want to develop. They are to:

- Increase their technical writing abilities with a particular focus in argumentation and logic;
- Increase their understanding of Citizenship and the influence of worldviews; and,
- Increase their ability to make connections between texts and across mediums.

The outcomes allow a student to develop skills over the semester rather than focus on learning content. This means that students need to work in an assessment model that allows for continuous growth. The model I found works best to provide continuous feedback with evaluation at the end of the course only, was a combined contract and portfolio. The individualized contract is created by the students, with teacher input, to establish goals the student hopes to achieve over the semester. These goals are based on the course outcomes with students recognizing their individual needs or deficiencies. Often, students also include personal goals such as not procrastinating, being on time for class, or learning about different groups of people.

The portfolio is a collection of student work over the semester. This is, most often, written work but can also include visuals, video, or other media. It is vital that the teacher read and comment on all the student’s work without assigning a grade. The purpose of the portfolio is to have the student examine their writing and thinking through the entire course.

The goals of the course are matched to assignments in an effort to allow students to scaffold skills from one paper to the next while exploring their assumptions about their world. Students compare the Milesean Philosophers’ ideas of origins to other ideas of what it means to be human from popular culture sources such as the

³ O’Connor, Ken. “A Repair Kit for Broken Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades.” (Educational Training Institute, 2007), 106.

⁴ Ibid, 2011

movie *Bicentennial Man*, or the Ted Talk *The Gentle Genius of Bonobos*.^{5,6} Students also select an item of pop culture (movie, commercial, book, song, band, etc.) and present to the class the underpinning philosophic content that has shaped that item or idea. In each of these assignments, as well as others, students are given the opportunity to challenge their own beliefs and the cultural norms they live in.

The flexibility students are given in terms of which side of an argument they choose to support and the content they choose to research allows them to shift their focus away from learning what will be on the next test. Instead, the material provides a rich backdrop from which to work on improving writing, reading across texts, and understanding citizenship. If students were forced to write a test, with the goal of generating marks or assessing progress, the introspective and creative nature of their tasks would be significantly reduced.

The final assignment of the course is a reflection and meta-analysis of the student's own work. This challenges students to think about how they have improved in the outcomes of the course, and requires them to provide specific examples of their improvement as evidence of growth. Within this assignment, students are also given opportunity to provide a final reflection on the completion of their co-created contract.

This process allows students to engage in metacognition about changes in their thinking as a result of the readings and assignments of the semester. In my experience, this is a challenge for most students as they have rarely been given the opportunity to reflect on their work and consider how their ideas have changed.

These changes, toward a philosophy that embraces student-centric approach to content and unconstrained timelines, can help students achieve deeper learning about themselves and their world, resulting in well prepared 21st century citizens.

Observable Impacts

The most dramatic positive evidence for this philosophy of reducing the focus of instruction from content to skills and introspection comes from the words of students. Students express greater academic success in this setting. For example, "For the first time I understand how to write a paper" or, "This is the first semester I have been passing an ELA class." With less pressure to get the 'right' answer, students can focus on learning.

⁵ Columbus, Chris. 1999. "The Bicentennial Man." Touchstone Pictures, December 17

⁶ Savage-Rumbaugh, Susan. 2004. "The Gentle Genius of Bonobos." Ted Talks. February. http://www.ted.com/talks/susan_savage_rumbaugh_on_apes_that_write

Students enjoy wrestling with complex ideas in a multitude of forms. Students comment that, “This book changed the way I live my life.” Students articulate clearly that the course is designed in a way that focuses them on becoming better people and better students, then trying to guess what will give them the highest marks. For example, “I know I did not do a complete final portfolio but I now think I have meaning in my life. I am not sure what that should be as a mark.”

Challenges

The challenges in this type of instruction are twofold. First is overcoming the student habit of focusing efforts on marks rather than improvement. Many students have been conditioned to achieve at a high standard, measured by grades, regardless of learning. It has taken me a significant amount of energy to teach students (and parents) about the learning process. A second challenge is finding time to give quality feedback. I believe constructing a class with a philosophy of reduced content and a focus on students’ skill development must involve students in their own assessment. For example, many students will find it beneficial to complete reflections on their work to identify to the teacher where they are focused on improving. This helps the teacher also focus on these areas with their feedback.

While good teachers are often skilled at bringing student interests into a course, this generation of learners has the entire world’s knowledge at their fingertips. Challenging students’ assumptions about themselves and their world rather than delivering content seems to me to better meet this generation’s needs. Philosophy 120 helps students think deeply about themselves and to more fully understand their world.

Bibliography

- Columbus, Chris. 1999. “The Bicentennial Man.” Touchstone Pictures, December 17.
- Davies, Anne, Sandra Herbst, and Beth Parrott Reynolds. “Leading the Way to Making Classroom Assessment Work.” *Connections Publishing Inc.* 2008.
- O’Connor, Ken. “A Repair Kit for Broken Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades.” *Educational Training Institute.* 2007
- Marzano, Robert J., Debra J. Pickering, and Tammy Heflebower. “The Highly Engaged Classroom.” *Marzano Research Laboratory.* 2011.
- Savage-Rumbaugh, Susan. 2004. “The Gentle Genius of Bonobos.” *Ted Talks.* February. http://www.ted.com/talks/susan_savage_rumbaugh_on_apes_that_write
- Trilling, Bernie and Charles Fadel. “21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times.” *Jossey-Bass.* 2009.

Biography

Chris Ryan teaches Physics, Philosophy, and Math in Anglophone East School District in New Brunswick. He is a graduate of the University of New Brunswick's Renaissance College ('05) and the Saint Thomas University Bachelor of Education program. He is also active in helping to improve the teaching profession, most recently serving as a teacher representative on the New Brunswick high school reform committee.

His email address is Chris.L.Ryan@unb.ca