

M. Folescu: Teaching Philosophy

Philosophy is more than an activity designed to find reasoning errors in our arguments. Most philosophical arguments can be thought to start from real life situations, where alternatives are difficult to assess. My goal as a philosophy professor is to train students to find the supporting evidence for any given argument and prepare them for a life of informed, critically examined, unbiased decision making. To achieve this goal, I emphasize reading difficult texts, developing arguments in speech and writing, and student-led discussion.

In *Self and Others*, an introductory course, students connect possible real-life scenarios to metaphysical and political views. Working individually, they answer questions such as, What evidence is there that there is no distinction between dream experiences and real life experiences? What type of (in)equality is involved in supporting social contract theories? What principles of toleration can be developed in a (non-)religious society? Questions like these lead to rough reconstructions of philosophical arguments, which students then refine in small group discussions. After class, they practice uncovering, in writing, the argumentative structure in a new text. For their final essay, students build on this process of rational reconstruction, defending normative stances regarding observed matters of fact. A nursing student who criticized Locke's vague definition of "innocent delights" in a homework assignment went on to argue that policy makers should enable citizens to devote their lives to self-actualization. These assignments bring philosophy into the students' lives by providing them with the tools to analyze topics they care about.

In my classes, I also provide a strong foundation in the use of thought experiments. Working in small teams, throughout the semester, students start by recalling an event they were involved in or might have witnessed. The teams are asked to decide on something like the moral of the story, a lesson that the event might be seen to illustrate. Students, then, tweak different variables, to see how the moral of the story changes. They learn pretty quickly that changing the color of a sweater or the time of day won't dramatically change the initial lesson. However, changing the country in which the event might have occurred, or the gender of all the participants involved, might move the needle towards a significantly different outcome. The team must keep track of all of the proposed changes and explain why they consider only some of these significant. They must also record what hidden assumptions are revealed when a significant change occurs. These projects, once completed, are presented to the rest of the class. They foster the students' philosophical creativity by enabling them to apply imagined scenarios to real life situations.

Students leave my classroom equipped with the tools to apply philosophical rigor to practical and abstract matters, to communicate effectively both with people who have thought about some of the same issues that they are bringing forth, and with those who have never considered them. Together with a strong foundation in critical thinking methods that will allow them to adapt to inevitable changes in information processing technologies, this prepares them for the next phase of their lives, whether a career in an industry based on information gathering and processing, or graduate study in philosophy.