**Engaging Introductory Philosophy Students Through Overarching Question Assignments**

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1. Motivation
   1. As a mostly problem-oriented philosopher designing a philosophy of human nature course, I was **frustrated with the historical organization** of most available textbooks
   2. because it was **hard to get students to think about a problem** that a particular author was addressing.
   3. In my experience, I’ve been unable to generate a lot of interest in the question of what human nature is according to philosopher X, just for its own sake.
   4. I got comments about not seeing the point of the material.
   5. So I was seeking a way to organize the course around problems that the students could find interesting and engaging in their own right, rather than start from historical sources and work toward their motivations.
   6. I was also **dissatisfied with my own sense of the cohesiveness and direction** of the course, so I needed a way to clarify and solidify my reasons for choosing the particular selections I did.
   7. Many introductory survey courses are already organized around questions or problems such as free will, skepticism, the existence of God, etc. But (in my experience) students often come to a course expecting to be asked to master a body of knowledge—to learn what philosophers X, Y and Z had to say.
   8. They **expect to learn about philosophy**, and not necessarily to do philosophy.
   9. **But that’s only half of what philosophy is**.
   10. Furthermore, we all know that **active learning is more effective than passive**.
   11. The motivating hope of the assignment that I want to share with you is that adding an element of doing philosophy helps to
       1. engage students (and in part to attract majors),
       2. make the course more cohesive.
2. OAQs
   1. So I decided to make an assignment out of it. I asked the students to jump in and write a brief answer to the question from their own experience to start off the unit, which counted as a daily homework assignment.
      1. The intention is that if they have some sense of what they think, they have a toehold and will engage differently with the texts: there would be more personal give-and-take.
      2. Then each unit would be capped by a revised and expanded essay written “in dialogue with” the authors we read for the unit.
   2. Exercise: Answer the question.
      1. Afterward: How did you think about the question? What did you think about as you tried to approach it? What further questions occurred to you?
   3. Syllabus design
      1. As I revised my syllabi, I decided to try centering each unit over not just a loose theme, but an overarching question to which each reading could be seen as some (perhaps partial) answer.
         1. This resulted in some revision of course content; it’s one of those circular processes: I have some texts in mind, they generate a question, I find the question doesn’t quite work and I revise it, maybe seeking a new text or two to replace it.
         2. For the question you just answered, we read a number of texts that deal with the question of what’s distinctive about a human life, and how our lives can be meaningful.
         3. You can see the latest iterations of my other questions on the syllabus handout.
      2. Just developing such questions helped me, but I discovered that it wasn’t enough to make the relevance of each reading salient to the students. Hence the “before” part of the assignment.
         1. In the latest iteration, I also took about ten minutes of class at the end of a unit and asked students to reflect on how they thought their thinking about the question had developed since their first draft.
      3. This assignment has the advantages that, if the questions are designed well by the professor and done well by the student, it gives the students a sense of engagement with the larger conversation about things that matter—an important purpose of liberal arts education.
         1. It makes the architecture of the course and the purpose of each unit clear to them.
         2. It requires mastery of texts.
         3. It provides practice with things like charitable reading, articulating others’ positions, evaluating and criticizing arguments, and articulating their own ideas.
         4. It requires them to work beyond the internal content of the texts, because few of the authors are answering the explicit question I articulated.
         5. It gives them a sense of ownership of the material because it begins with their own thinking.
         6. And it requires a certain amount of metacognition, which helps them to notice what they’ve learned.
3. Pitfalls
   1. The strategy got considerable interest and approval from my colleagues, but the first version of it was mostly a failure.
      1. Most students’ revised essays were essentially their first one with a few quotes and references to texts thrown in.
      2. Few displayed understanding of what the real philosophical issue was.
      3. Few really wrestled with the material.
   2. So I needed to beef up the details of the assignment and provide a more detailed rubric for how I would grade the second essay in order to ensure that the engagement and dialogue I was after would be there.
      1. (What you see on the handout is the very detailed version of this.)
   3. I worked on sharpening the questions and making sure I made a day’s lesson connect to the question.
   4. I also realized that the assignment would go better if the students not only give an answer to the question, but also spend time explaining the question, its motivations, and its importance.
      1. So I’ve gone through several iterations of questions to make them sharper.
   5. Next time, I’m trying out a new structure.
      1. In the first part, the students should present the philosophical problem that gives rise to the overarching question.
      2. Then they should explain the ways different thinkers have approached the problem.
      3. Finally, they should give their own take on the problem, supported by reasons.
      4. These instructions won’t change the nature or purpose of the assignment dramatically, but I think it makes the scaffolding of the assignment stronger.
   6. I also need to be more intentional about teaching them what I’m asking them to do. (I’m open to ideas on this!)
4. Discussion
   1. Generate OAQs for your own courses OR talk about how to get students to do it right OR ??
   2. Suggest improvements