

How to Sit in the Back of the Philosophy Classroom

Or, How A Control Freak
Ceded Some Control Over His Classroom

Russell Marcus
Hamilton College

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Objectives

- ▶ To discuss...
 1. My experiences facilitating student presentations in introductory classes through senior seminars
 2. The benefits and drawbacks of student-led classes.
 3. Distinctions among solo presentations, paired presentations, and panel discussions.
 4. Assessment in student-led classes
- ▶ To distribute...
 1. Sample presentation assignments
 2. Some rubrics for grading
 3. A short bibliography

Jargon/Keywords

- Student-centered learning
 - or learner-centered teaching, LCT
- Classroom inversion
 - or the flipped classroom



Philosophy Instructors' Roles

- What are the roles of a teacher in an undergraduate philosophy class?
 - Disperse content
 - Motivate interest in philosophy
 - Nurture philosophical skills (e.g. critical thinking, logical reasoning)
 - Foster intellectual maturity
 - Evaluate mastery of content
- Note that these objectives hold for all levels of undergraduate education.
 - motivation might be a little less in the advanced classes
 - content might be a little more
- So, how do we perform those roles?

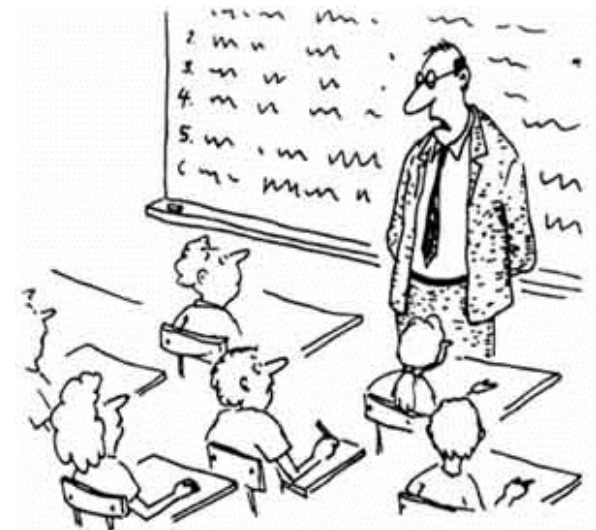
The Standard Model



- The instructor works from the front of the classroom
 - discussing the nature of the good, the mind/body problem, how to discriminate fallacious from valid inferences.
- Lazy instructors
 - Come to class with a few observations on an assigned reading
 - Hope to generate discussion
- Ambitious instructors
 - Have considered plans for engaging students in conversation
 - Maybe distribute questions in advance to be discussed
 - Or attempt to defend a counter-intuitive position in order to generate student input
- In either case, the instructor takes on the role of classroom leader.
- Even in those of us who regard ourselves as thoughtful, innovative teachers, there is a strong temptation to maintain control of a class by leading the discussion.
- That's what we are trained and paid to do!

Problems with the Standard Model

- We are often frustrated by our students' inability to take responsibility for their own learning.
- A good lecturer might motivate some interest, but it's not clear that the standard model fosters intellectual maturity.
- It is unclear how much content actually gets learned.
 - ▶ Some learning styles (using Myers-Briggs personality type tests or Grasha-Reichman learning-styles metrics) interact poorly with standard-model teaching styles.
 - ▶ Lage, Platt and Treglia ('inverted classroom') argue that moving delivery of content to outside of the classroom appeals to all kinds of learners.
- "Having some authority over how one takes in new information significantly enhances one's ability to remember it" (Doyle 78).
 - ▶ See Voss et al 2011.
- Such recent research undermines the way in which the standard model of the philosophy class should be viewed.



"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"

Student Empowerment

- Re-thinking the nature of classroom leadership is consistent with some well-known critiques of educational tradition.
- “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).
- “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).
- But perhaps you think that you don't accept the standard model of teacher control over the classroom.



Power Table

Adapted from Doyle 79

Classroom Decisions	Teacher	Students	Together	NA
What are the learning outcomes for the course?				
Which texts will be used?				
How will students' learning be assessed?				
When will exams be given?				
What are the formats and topics covered on the exams?				
When are papers due?				
What are the topics for the papers?				
Will rewrites be allowed?				
How will classes be taught?				
How will groups (if any) be formed?				
What kind of grading scale will be used?				
Attendance policy				
Late work policy				
Tardiness policy				
Classroom deportment policy				

The Dilemma

- We want to direct the details of our courses.
- But the more we do so, the less empowered and intellectually independent our students will be.
- Classroom control and management can be essential.
- But I want to avoid bucket learning.



Overview of a Solution

Sitting in the back of the classroom

- I cede (some) control over the classroom dialectic by allowing students to lead the class.
 - ▶ Not just short assignments
 - ▶ I design the syllabi for my courses.
 - ▶ I lead some classes, especially early in the term.
 - ▶ Then I turn the classes over to my students, allowing myself a voice, but deferring to the students to lead (most) days' discussions.
- Some benefits
 - ▶ My sitting in the back of the classroom can increase student responsibility and ownership and make classes more fun and productive.
 - ▶ Students tend to be more creative than I am about the content of their presentations.
 - ▶ They see with fresh eyes philosophical material that I can only read through experienced (i.e. corrupted and jaundiced) lenses.
 - ▶ They tend to be more worried about boring their classmates and so more creative and effective with content delivery.
 - ▶ Most students know that their oral presentation skills are limited and that they need practice.

The Central Problem of Sitting in the Back

Students generally lack the pedagogical abilities to run a class.

- They are like most of us when we leave graduate school...
 - ...with less mastery over philosophical content
- I facilitate behind the scenes.
 - Preparing students for taking leadership roles
 - Helping to distribute content in non-standard ways
 - Borrowing from the inverted classroom
- Students must be aware of how they will be assessed for their work.
- Most importantly, I have to create a trusting and serious classroom environment and tone.

How Not to Sit in the Back of the Class

- Unger at CUNY
- Consistent with the inverted, or flipped, classroom

The Inverted Classroom

The flipped classroom inverts traditional teaching methods, delivering instruction online outside of class and moving "homework" into the classroom.

THE INVERSION

The Traditional Classroom

Teacher's Role: Sage on the Stage



The Flipped Classroom

Teacher's Role: Guide on the Side



WHAT A FLIPPED CLASSROOM MODEL DOES

Though I wish I did more of this!

Content Delivery

- In contrast to the inverted classroom, I am not interested in giving up on the goal of content delivery.
- I appreciate replacing content delivery with augmentation, depth and fun activities.
- But my assignments tend to be serious philosophy readings and I don't see a way of avoiding content delivery altogether.
- I want to marry Freire's criticisms of bucket learning with some kinds of content distribution.

Protecting Content Delivery

- I have detailed syllabi motivated by specific learning objectives.
 - ▶ I stick to the schedule (control freak).
 - ▶ If I'm going to decentralize control at all, I need failsafes on content.
- I prepare detailed lecture notes for each class.
 - ▶ In the beginning of the term, I lead classes using those notes.
 - ▶ All semester, I post notes on the course website after class for all students to see.
- Once the semester gets going, most classes proceed mostly by student presentations.
 - ▶ Email notes 1-2 weeks in advance:
 - ▶ "Here are some notes I have prepared for class. The most-relevant sections are probably 4-6, but feel free to focus on what you think is important. I hope that you find them helpful in preparing your presentation."
 - ▶ Lage, Platt and Treglia (inverting) prepare and distribute powerpoints with sound, which wouldn't work so well with my goals.
- Any student could, theoretically, just read my notes as their presentation.
- I also offer to meet with students in advance.
 - ▶ About 80% take the offer.
 - ▶ Obvious ancillary benefits
 - ▶ Introductory students are least likely to come in (60-75%).

A Self-Referential Aside on Slide Projection

- I start the semester trying to model the ways in which I hope class will proceed.
- PowerPoint-style slides to project my notes for everyone to see.
 - Some video to liven up the class, or a relevant cartoon
 - beware of 'skepticism' and other common terms
- Plenty of quotes for analysis
- Students are better than me with technology...
 - Prezi
- ...and pop-culture references
 - V for Vendetta, Adjustment Bureau, Inception, Gone Baby Gone, Idiocracy
- Not everyone follows my lead
 - In my last seminar, I was the only one to use slides.

Introductory Classes

- Hamilton intro students were a little bored.
 - Swarthmore seminars
 - But I didn't think that intro students could write useful seminar papers or lead full classes.
 - They may well surprise you: Eric
- I tell students to prepare 10-15 minutes of material.
 - I encourage creative options (see handout).
 - End with questions for discussion
 - The actual presentation usually lasts 25-35 minutes with discussion.
- I have to manage lots of nerves in introductory classes.
- The students are more likely to follow my notes too closely.
- Even the strongest students find that leading the class is an important challenge.

Sophomore- and Junior-Level Courses

- Students are more mature.
 - able to deliver more content on their own
 - draw on more of their knowledge base and make better connections
 - Single presentations can last an entire seventy-five minute class, though 34-45 minutes is more the norm.
- Even when not working in pairs, presenters often coordinate.
 - Nick and Kylie
- Classes take on a workshop feel even when they are essentially chalk-and-talk.

Senior Seminars

- One presenter each class
- The presenter prepares and distributes a seminar paper in advance.
 - ▶ Short paper, analyzing and criticizing the reading for the day
 - ▶ Papers are sent to everyone in the class at least one day before the class meets.
 - ▶ Everyone in the class reads the paper as well as the assigned reading in advance.
- In class, the student who wrote the seminar paper presents the paper to the class.
 - ▶ Some read their paper.
 - ▶ Some do PowerPoint slides.
 - ▶ Some just talk through an outline.
 - ▶ Some say, “Forget all of that; here’s what I’m thinking now.”
 - ▶ Susannah
- Papers vary in quality, but they work well as a secondary source for the class.

Solo Presentations, Paired Presentations, Panel Discussions

- Solo presentations
 - ▶ Students engage the primary reading for class, preparing what they find to be interesting with help from my lecture notes and any secondary sources I recommend.
 - ▶ They meet with me and can talk with other students.
 - ▶ Oral Communications Center
- Pairs
 - ▶ Larger classes
 - ▶ Allow students to choose partners
 - ▶ Can play to their strengths
 - ▶ Problems with social interaction: Erica and Dan
- Panels
 - ▶ Goal: Assimilation
 - ▶ More difficult than content delivery
 - ▶ Turned out to be fun review sessions

Assessment

- I don't use any particular rubric, but see handouts.
- I provide detailed assignment sheets about expectations.
- I take notes during the presentation.
- Then, I send an email with comments and a grade.
 - content
 - organization
 - vocal tone and body language
 - management of discussion, responses to questions
 - especially anything philosophically interesting
- The post-presentation email is work, but students appreciate it.
 - forestalls complaints about grades
 - helpful for my own determination of a grade

Group Assessment

The post-presentation email

Panel presentations should show significant evidence of shared work and understanding. To assist me with the assignment of a grade, after the panel presentation, each member of the panel should send me a confidential email containing brief details concerning how the preparatory work was distributed. I understand that the person who speaks the most during the presentation may not be the person most responsible for the work. I hope that your work, and your grades, will ordinarily be distributed equally. I will ordinarily not assign a grade on the presentation until I receive emails from all members of the panel.

A Balancing Act

- Problem: Some presentations are very weak. How does the instructor know how to balance letting the presenter do her thing and moving the class forward.
- The audience tends to want to let the student talk and fears challenging her/him.
- Students do tend to be more quiet and respectful of their peers.
 - ▶ This is good: keeps the class focused.
 - ▶ This can be bad: students can be too deferential.

Final Reflections

- Presentations can be a way of ramping up (or scaffolding) toward a substantial paper.
- Do students resent the assignment?
 - lazy professor criticism
 - serious worry in larger classes
 - problem more with my colleagues
- Logic?
- Short version of this presentation: prepare the students to succeed and then sit in the back during class and shut up as much as possible.
- Your experiences?

A Short Bibliography

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