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*Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.*  
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

I teach philosophy, which traditionally has been viewed as a subject more abstract than most. Nevertheless, I have always seen philosophy as a practical discipline highly relevant to daily life. My intention has been to help students become aware of and question their unconscious, culturally produced assumptions about who they are, how the world is put together, and what is really of value. Over time, I have come to recognize that much of what we call education emphasizes knowledge that reaches no deeper than the verbal level, and in fact I believe this is true of much of what we learn, whether it is in a class, from a book, or from a conversation. If what we learn does not go beyond the merely verbal or conceptual level, then we have missed something very important.

### **Learning to Delay Judgment**

The first week of each philosophy class, I always devote time to the topic of learning to delay judgment. Delaying judgment simply means resisting the habitual impulse to immediately leap in and agree or disagree, to evaluate some idea that we have just heard about. To delay judgment means to take the trouble to understand what is being said—to identify the main claims being made, clarify the meaning of fundamental concepts, and understand the reasons being offered in support of a view—before deciding whether it makes sense. We also spend some time examining why it's important to do this~ it is impossible to do an adequate job of evaluating something without first understanding it, and it is unfair to the person presenting the view to attempt to do so. In talking about this in class, students readily agree with the idea of delaying judgment and freely acknowledge that rushing to judgment is neither intelligent nor fair-minded. On an exam, they more often than not can do a very adequate job of explaining what is meant by delaying judgment.

But students' ability to provide a verbal explanation of something does not mean they have deeply understood it. Very frequently, the same students who did such a fine job of explaining delaying judgment

on an exam will not actually delay judgment in classroom discussions or elsewhere. When I ask whether they have actually been delaying judgment in our present discussion, they are surprised to find themselves answering no.

There's a lesson here for me as an instructor. It now seems clear that many of my students had not had what they learned filter down into their consciousnesses to the point that they could recognize nondelayed judgment in themselves or others without someone to point it out to them. Delaying judgment was not something they knew how to do in carrying on their lives. And even if they did know how to do it and did recognize the various opportunities to do it, would they see the value in it and actually choose to do it? So far, they were still behaving exactly the same way they always had.

I see the situation as symptomatic of a significant and widespread deficiency in our educational institutions. A great deal of what students learn is how to describe or define some idea in words: they learn how to *talk* about it. But seldom does the idea become anything more to them than words. When the day's class is over, it's business as usual.

### **What Is Deeper Learning?**

*Do not speak much...abo ut philosophical theories and precepts: but do that which follows from them. For example, at a banquet do not say how a person ought to eat, but eat as you ought to eat.*

—Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, Section SLVL

Much of what we learn in our schools is what might be called conceptual learning: it has to do with acquiring knowledge of concepts, factual descriptions, and theoretical constructs. While conceptual learning can be valuable, there is the possibility of something deeper, and that is the kind of learning that alters how we feel, how we see the world, and how we behave. This is what Carl Rogers has called significant learning (1961, p. 280): “By significant learning, I mean learning which is more than an accumulation of facts. It is learning which makes a difference—in the individual's behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes, and in his personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion... [of facts or theories], but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence.”

How many times do we learn something in class, from a book, or from a conversation and then go on about our lives in exactly the same way we did before we acquired this piece of learning? It seems to me that the really significant things that we learn are the things that change our way of being in the world, and we can all recall things that we've learned that forever changed our lives. The world forever looked different to me after the day I learned that what we call race is simply a way of subdividing the human species based on arbitrarily selected physical characteristics, and that it would make just as much sense to call tall people or large-eared people a race as it does to say that people with similar skin pigmentation are a race. With a little searching, most of us can come up with many such examples.

I am not satisfied with learning that only results in people being able to talk about certain concepts, learning that does not have the potential to transform people's lives for their betterment and the betterment of their community. What can we, as teachers, do to promote deeper, more personally meaningful learning? I believe there are at least four approaches we can take.

### **Moving Toward Deeper Learning: Some Suggestions**

reason, motive, incentive, or perceived benefit to want to learn and to use that learning and behave differently when they leave our classes. For conceptual learning, a grade in a class provides some incentive to learn for a test or to write a paper, but for deeper learning to occur there must be something else. Students need an explanation or demonstration of why having and using this learning will be of benefit to them in their lives.

Often we ask students to learn something, but we don't tell them what's in it for them if they do. We need to take time to say, "Here are some of the things you can do with this once you've learned it. Here are some of the ways people are hurt by not knowing this." Anecdotes and stories from our personal histories, those of students, or our class readings can be useful here.

Comment [a1]: This is wonderful direction for a lesson overview.

The most powerful way to learn the importance of a behavior is to experience the benefits. If I try out the new learning and directly experience benefits as a result, it is extremely likely that the new learning will become part of who I am.

*Model the Learning.* Gandhi recognized that if we want to produce change in the world, we must start with ourselves. If, for example, I want to work for peace in the world, I must start by practicing peace in my own life. I can vividly remember many peace demonstrations over the years in which angry and hostile demonstrators shouted in people's faces, and I can also remember how ineffective they usually were as far as advancing the cause of peace.

Likewise, if I want students to learn to easily acknowledge their mistaken beliefs, I must start by acknowledging my own mistaken beliefs and actions when they come up in class, as they surely will. Each one of these admissions can be viewed as an opportunity to model how to respond when one has been proven to be mistaken. Whether we like it or not, everything we do is modeling something.

The example we set is so much more important than what we tell people to do. What are the chances children will learn from verbal instruction not to eat junk food, if you continue to eat junk food yourself?

It is crucial for the instructor to model the behavior to be learned. Seeing me delaying judgment, not being personally attached to ideas, and not adopting a competitive stance in discussion has a much more powerful impact on students than anything I merely *say* to them about how to have a philosophical discussion. Furthermore, if they can see how the learning I am asking them to acquire benefits me, they will have some reason to move toward adopting the new way of doing things as well. For example, suppose I am able to listen carefully to someone in class who is disagreeing with what I've said and then easily acknowledge that what I have said is mistaken and thank the student for bringing this to my attention. Students see that this behavior benefits me by making it possible for me to easily exchange a false or misleading belief for a more accurate one, allowing me to have an enjoyable and stress-free interchange with someone holding a different view, and humanizing me in the eyes of others. Students have thus been given a powerful incentive to try out nonattachment to beliefs in their own lives.

Here's an additional example: I print exams and handouts on secondhand paper, used on one side, and I tell students that I do this because it is an easy way to reduce the rate at which trees are cut down to make new paper. If they see me taking a little extra trouble to act on my values, it becomes slightly more likely that students will learn to take a little more trouble to act on their values, too. They may also be willing to try out some of the less damaging environmental lifestyle choices that we have learned about in class, and learn what it is like to live a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. I have found my own behavior to be one of the most powerful teaching tools at my disposal.

*See the Benefits.* An important component in producing deeper learning is that students must have some

*Reward the Learning in Class.* Rewarding behavior in class is essential. Students are rewarded when they receive praise and acknowledgement when the new learning shows up in class discussion and in writing assignments. They are rewarded for deeper learning when tests and writing assignments measure their ability to use learning rather than simply explain the meaning of concepts. Assignments might require students to try out new learning in their lives and then report on what the experience was like. Traditionally, students' grades are determined only by their ability to accurately describe a concept; they are not rewarded with respect to grades for how well they make use of a concept in their daily lives.

Logic class is a good example. It's very easy to give the students tests in which they are required to analyze writing samples they have not seen before, with grading based on their ability to identify conclusions and reasoning patterns or recognize and refute faulty arguments. They are graded on their ability to use concepts in applying them to real examples of communication. How much more appropriate this is than testing them on whether they can correctly define or explain argument, premise, and unstated assumption. Would you rather have for your surgeon someone who knows how to talk about surgical instruments and who can correctly define and explain what is a scalpel, a forceps, a retractor, or would you rather have a doctor who has learned how and when to skillfully use these instruments to improve human health? In philosophy, our ability to operate on our beliefs, practices, unconscious assumptions, and choices is what is truly important.

I have found it useful to keep one question continually before me as I work through each class: What is truly important for the students to be able to do as a result of taking my class?

*Create Opportunities to Use Learning Outside of Class.* It is crucial to set up opportunities for students to use new learning outside of class, and for them to receive the benefits from the learning in their lives outside of school. Students must do something different that makes use of the new learning. If the new behavior produces better results than they've had in the past, they will regularly incorporate the new learning into their lives. Here are some concrete examples of some approaches I have taken in philosophy classes.

Comment [a2]: Great idea for discussion questions

- What would it be like to try living a different way as a result of exposure to some philosophical idea? One can read and talk about the Buddhist concept of compassion in class; this is conceptual learning. Why not read about compassion *and* try it out for a day, and then write a report on what happened and what was learned?
- Epictetus says that suffering is the result of a gap between what you have (your external circumstances) and what you want or expect (your internal dispositions): we suffer when we don't have what we want. Keep a journal of your day-to-day irritations and unhappinesses and write about how much of your suffering in each case comes from your own desires and expectations.
- Students can be given the opportunity to devise an environmentally conscious diet for themselves: one that is bioregional, plant based, organic and uses primarily or only whole foods with minimal packaging. They can then eat this way for a week and write a report on what they did and what they learned.
- If you've talked about sustainability and re-using (rather than the more energy-intensive recycling) in your class, you can ask students to turn in all their written work on the back side of paper that's already been used once, so that they actually get some practice trying out a new behavior. You can do this in your class even if you have not talked about sustainability; not all the important learning that takes place in a class will or needs to fall within the boundaries of some specific topic or academic discipline. Interestingly, in the past I have actually received student papers that railed against wasting resources and against deforestation, but were written on new paper, when the student had the option of using secondhand paper.

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- Ask students to use gender-neutral and other discrimination-avoiding language choices in their papers, and even make it part of how the paper is graded. As in the previous example, I have found that some students who wrote papers critical of sexism chose to use sexist constructions in their own papers.

Anything that will get students to attempt to integrate the new learning into their lives has the potential to become a very meaningful class activity. This is not how I was taught as a student, but it is how I want to work at this point in my evolution as an instructor.

### **Know Thyself**

It continues to be a fascinating challenge for me to try to find ways to help students take things from class that will help them transform their lives for the better. With some thought and a willingness to break with tradition, it can almost always be done.

It is surprising how many things are parts of our classes simply because they have always been taught as parts of that particular subject. Tradition and sheer inertia can be powerful forces that shape what we do without us really being aware of it.

Venn diagrams have been taught as a standard part of logic classes for decades. So have truth tables. Though I know how to use Venn diagrams and truth tables, I never actually do use them, and I'm a professional philosopher. When I realized this some years ago, I stopped including them as part of my logic classes. How can I ask students to learn something that I don't find useful myself? I have since asked many people who teach logic whether they use these diagrams and tables, and the answer is always no. Why should we ask students to learn this material?

Some instructors say that lower-division classes have a major portion of their value not in producing learning that will impact a student's daily life, but rather in laying the groundwork for more advanced classes in a particular discipline. The purpose of these classes, it is said, is not to give students something of value to them now, but to give them terminology, information, and methods that will serve as a foundation for their more advanced classes in the discipline.

I disagree with this perception. Classes cannot have their primary value in laying groundwork for more advanced classes, because many students never take the advanced classes. The ones who do still typically take only one or two lower-division classes in any specific discipline other than the one they ultimately select as their major. Outside of their major, students typically take only enough credits in a discipline to satisfy the general education requirements. If we ask the students to spend their time memorizing terms and classification systems and theories, will this not ensure that they never take another class in our discipline?

We need to ask ourselves, "What are the most important things I want students to take away from this class and still have with them in six months, a year, or 10 years?" We can also ask, "How has studying and acquiring knowledge of this subject area changed me as a person, altered my life, changed how I experience the world?"

When you know how these specific items of learning have been integrated into your self and your own life, you will be able to create class activities and assignments that will help students to acquire this same learning and do it on a deeper level where it will transform their lives the same way that learning from your discipline

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has already transformed your life.

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It is my hope that the ideas presented here can be the beginning of a series of dialogues in which all of us can share our ongoing experiments in the classroom and find ways to make teaching more focused on deeper learning for our students and for ourselves.

### Reference

Rogers, Carl (1961). *On Becoming A Person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

*Dale Luy-renbehl is Professor of Philosophy at Lane Community College (OR). This abstract is an abridged version of an article that first appeared in The Community College Moment. An expanded version of the article is scheduled for publication in Teaching Philosophy. It is abstracted here with permission.*

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