

A Mastery-Centered Approach for Teaching Moral Philosophy

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The Problem

There's a lot of potential in designing high school ethics classes using a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach. It offers a number of advantages to simple lecture-based philosophy education. In particular, it provides learners with more opportunities for active, engaged, and authentic philosophy problem-solving. And since philosophy teachers typically think that it would be preferable for their students to learn how to *do* philosophy rather than merely learning *about* philosophy, there's good prima facie reason to think that a well-designed PBL ethics course is just the sort of innovation that we need to see in high schools.

However, it can be difficult to design and implement such a course effectively. My own efforts in this regard have had mixed results. Student engagement and performance seem, on the whole, to be better in the PBL-focused Moral Philosophy course than in previous iterations of the course that I have taught to high school students. But the novelty of the course design wears off and many students soon begin to lose interest as they struggle to grow beyond their initial intuitions about a moral problem. This suggests to me that, if the PBL version of the course is to reach its full potential, it needs to be consciously designed to avoid this problem.

The Proposal

The solution to the problem that I have developed is to recast the course within a framework that emphasizes mastery. Drawing on research about learning and motivation, we can carefully design effective scaffolding throughout the semester that will help our learners make great strides in their philosophical problem-solving abilities. We do this by (1) explicitly teaching simple philosophical skills in isolation from complex problems, (2) practicing those individual skills using a variety of exercises and in a variety of contexts, (3) practicing integrating those different skills to solve increasingly complex moral issues, and (4) learning how and when to transfer those skills and use them to help solve very difficult moral problems.

This design allows learners to continually hone their abilities as they engage in the self-directed study of authentic moral issues that interest them.

The Session

My aim in the session is to share my course design with attendees, discuss the results of teaching the course, and solicit feedback and comments that will help me continue to improve how the course is taught. I also aim to send attendees home with resources to help them implement such a course.

References

- Ambrose, Susan A. et al (2010) *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).
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- Savery, John R. (2015) 'Overview of Problem-Based Learning: Definitions and Distinctions,' in Andrew Walker et al (ed.) *Essential Readings in Problem-Based Learning* (Purdue University Press): 5-16.

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