



Chicago
Center for
Teaching

INDIVIDUAL TEACHING CONSULTATION FINAL REPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Date: February 4, 2016
Instructor: Anastasia Artemyev Berg
Course: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities II
Consultant(s): Yaqub Hilal
Attendance: 19

Executive Summary

Anastasia is an instructor in the ‘Philosophical Perspectives’ sequence that is offered as part of the college’s core curriculum program. The sequence is intended to provide students who have had little or no exposure to philosophy with a general introduction to the discipline. I observed a section of this class during week 5 of the quarter. The course is largely discussion based, with each class centered on a pre-assigned text, in this instance Descartes’ *Meditations*.

The students I observed actively participated in classroom discussion and were responsive to Anastasia’s questions and comments. Moreover, they appeared interested throughout the class. Anastasia took great efforts to ensure that everyone understood the text and employed a variety of pedagogical methods toward this end. These included writing key words and arguments on the blackboard and using everyday examples to help shed light on the text. An added advantage of the latter approach is that it made a potentially obscure text relevant to the students’ daily lives. To help Anastasia toward her goal of creating an inclusive classroom in which all students participate in critically engaging philosophical texts, I suggest 1) that she provide students with a quick overview of the day’s lesson plan, or perhaps some of the key questions she intends to address, at the beginning of the class and 2) that she make use of group activities so as to encourage even greater classroom participation and student-to-student engagement.

Part I: Pre-observation Meeting

I met with Anastasia on Wednesday, 3rd February to discuss the Individual Teaching Consultation that we had scheduled for later in the week. During this meeting she described to me her teaching goals for the class and the kind of feedback that would be useful in helping her to realize these goals. Anastasia aims to create a classroom that is

inclusive, that is, one in which students feel comfortable sharing their opinions and participating in discussion. She centers classroom discussion on an assigned reading with the aim of encouraging students to engage texts productively. This means steering students away from simply ‘tearing down’ the texts under consideration and modeling for them how one goes about critically examining a philosophical argument or theory.

One of the concerns that Anastasia expressed about her teaching related to her classroom presentation: was she approachable, did she speak too quickly, did students feel comfortable raising questions? She wished also to receive feedback on her effectiveness in facilitating student participation and, more generally, on the way in which her classes were structured.

Part II: Observation

Structure

Anastasia began the class by offering a brief recap of what was discussed in the previous class: how Descartes arrives at the idea of external bodies. She then explained that the current class would continue this line of inquiry to consider how the idea of external bodies relates to Descartes’ theory of a body/soul distinction.

The recap proved effective in getting students’ attention and setting the stage for the day’s discussion. I suggest that Anastasia build on this practice of setting the stage for discussion by offering a quick overview of the day’s lesson plan or perhaps some of the key questions she intends to address. It would be helpful to write these up on the board so that students have them in mind throughout the session. In this way, she would not only provide students with a review of the last class, but also more clearly link that class to the current session, in turn building a framework for the course overall. Anastasia could alternatively ask students to derive these key questions or a list of key concepts based on their readings in order to motivate them to participate from the beginning. To provide an arc for the class, Anastasia might also consider wrapping up classroom discussion with a brief summary of the key points discussed and tying these in with some of the broader course themes.

Presentation

Anastasia positioned herself at the front of the classroom in view of all the students. The students meanwhile were seated around her in a rough semi-circle. Anastasia made regular eye contact with students, her voice was clear and it was easy to hear her from where I was sitting at the back of the classroom. Anastasia relied on the students’ participation by asking them specific questions both about the text and connections between it and their own experiences. For example, referring to Descartes’ theory of the relationship between mind and body, Anastasia asked students what they thought about this relationship and whether or not it helped them make sense of the world in which they

live. She later used the gloves on her desk to illustrate visually Descartes' theory of oneness.

During classroom discussion Anastasia made a point of relating the conversation back to the text at hand. For example, when discussing the idea of the soul's permanence in relation to the body's perishability, a student raised the issue of Alzheimer's and the deterioration of the mind that the disease entailed. In response to this comment, Anastasia directed the students' attention to the text, asking: "How would Descartes reply?" Anastasia also asked questions at varying levels of comprehension, acknowledged and responded to student comments with enthusiasm, and encouraged participation.

The ways in which Anastasia asked conceptual questions made for a congenial learning environment and kept discussion lively. The application of the text to everyday situations and scenarios also proved an effective way of getting students engaged, such as with the Descartes example described above. Similarly effective was Anastasia's employment of classroom props, such as the gloves, to clarify obscure aspects of the texts. This kind of real world connection, especially through concrete objects, helps students work through abstract concepts in a way that relates to their lived experiences.

On occasion Anastasia did seem to speak a little quickly and, as we discussed in our post-consultation meeting, this is something she will be mindful of in the future when explaining complex aspects of a text. To slow down the pace of her commentary, she might also consider taking time to write on the board, asking students to summarize a few points of the discussion before moving to the next topic, or have students raise their hands when they think she can slow down.

Engagement

Students made regular contributions to the discussion throughout the class period. Participation was even among students, with both female and male students contributing equally. Anastasia put students into conversation with each other by drawing attention to the parallels between their individual observations or comments. For example, when a student described the connection that Descartes imagined between the mind and body, Anastasia asked the class how this description related to a concern about the mind-body relationship that a student had raised earlier during discussion. Anastasia also rephrased questions when students appeared confused or were reluctant to speak.

Anastasia's questions were engaging and she was thoughtful about student participation and increasing student-to-student discussion. When posing questions, I do not think that Anastasia need worry about awkward silences (a concern that she had expressed to me during our initial meeting); according to my observations there were none. Should Anastasia continue to feel uneasy about prolonged silences, then I suggest she tell students that they have a few minutes to think about the question posed or give them a few minutes to write down a response to prepare them for the conversation.

Lastly, Anastasia might consider introducing some group or paired exercises for her classes. These types of activities can often encourage shy students to talk more and can also be an effective way for gauging whether or not students have understood the text. Incorporating these activities into the discussion would also help break up the session into more manageable modules, offering an opportunity for Anastasia to transition between different concepts/topics and to increase student motivation and participation throughout the class time.

Part III: Post-consultation summary

Date: 22nd March

Anastasia was very receptive to the feedback that I have outlined here and expressed a keen interest in applying these suggestions to her class in the spring quarter. During our post-consultation meeting, Anastasia volunteered some of her own observations on the class recording and suggested, in light of this, some of the ways in which she intended to adapt her teaching strategy. Among other things, she plans to make more effective use of the blackboard and to remain attentive of her speaking pace. Together, we also brainstormed some ideas for group work and other activities that would further enhance her students' learning experience.