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Better Teaching through Provocation

Jon Mills

The quest for an effective pedagogy differentiates the teacher from the researcher.[1] Within the humanities and social sciences, we are constantly confronted with the challenge of communicating complex material in a novel and effective manner. This difficulty is particularly salient in teaching introductory philosophy courses in which teachers try to foster abstract thinking within an active classroom environment. Active learning is bolstered by an approach that emphasizes creative problem solving, Socratic teaching methods, and critical thinking.[2] And active learning often begins with a question.[3] Perhaps the thoughtful use of questions is indeed the quintessential activity of an effective teacher, and in fact the use of questions is as old as teaching itself.

Despite those techniques, philosophical inquiry can sometimes lead to esoteric, pedantic, or even banal approaches to teaching that leave the neophyte intellectually lost or detached from the learning process. What often seems to be missing is the student's personal investment in the subject matter. Because of the sophistication and subtlety of philosophical minutiae, students may sometimes detach themselves from philosophical inquisitiveness unless they are provoked. I have found that the use of challenging questions and statements promotes active learning among students.

As a discipline, philosophy itself is intrinsically provocative. Many students taking introductory courses often enter the classroom with naive, narrowly defined views of human nature, science, and reality. I have found that provocative techniques directed toward the class force students to examine the grounds of their assumptions, which leads them to the formulation of solid, rational arguments and conclusions with logical foundations.

In the spirit of Nietzsche's infamously provocative style, the use of stimulating techniques in teaching introductory college courses can be immensely beneficial. Further, it is my intention to demonstrate that the role of provocation serves a purpose for general education. Although I will attempt to provide a framework for a provocative pedagogy in teaching introductory philosophy, it may be applied to any field, discipline, or subject matter.

Goals of Provocation

The goals of provocative teaching are grounded in a conceptual framework of critical thinking as well as in an understanding and appreciation of the many psychological processes that influence mental life. Within this context, I believe that the teacher's strategy should be designed to provoke or pique students to think; that is, to analyze the grounds of their beliefs, which can be directly applied to their personal lives. Knowledge without personal meaning is passionless, while personal belief without knowledge is blind.

I maintain a fundamental teaching standard—that the passive intellect is unacceptable. But provocative teaching must be used carefully. We must be aware of our own personal biases, preferences, and agendas that may be foisted upon students and seen as an attack. Ways of maintaining a delicate balance will be discussed later in the article.

Although neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for effective teaching, techniques designed to rouse, excite, incite, and awaken students from their "dogmatic slumbers" often lead to a classroom marked by intellectual vitality and emotional vigor. Stirring questions and statements should challenge (*and respectfully critique*) the method and rationale by which students arrive at conclusions and reexamine the grounds for their beliefs and attitudes. Students come to realize that conditioning or learning alone does not merit sufficient justification for a belief. I have found that this form of intellectual interrogation leads to the formulation of better logical arguments and beliefs, which can have personal meaning that students can directly apply to their lives.

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Guiding Principles

While introducing philosophical issues on the basic level, provocative questions specifically addressed to the class as a whole are a fruitful way to gain interest, pique curiosity, and facilitate student involvement. As an exercise in active learning, topics that are (*a*) generally intriguing, (*b*) presented with emotional intensity, and (*c*) that encourage participation are often enthusiastically entertained by students. The delivery and receptivity of such techniques, however, will depend upon how well formulated they are, as well as the stage presence and personality of the teacher. Of course, there is no one method that naturally fits all teaching approaches, and the teacher's own style will determine how the provocation is delivered.

As a rule of thumb, questions or statements that are too profound, abstract, or vague often confuse and intimidate students, which may lead to alienation and classroom anxiety. Provocative methods should be brief, concrete, and contain only one or two issues at a time for class reflection. Professors may want to avoid using esoteric vocabulary or jargon (depending upon the background of the students) to avoid confusion and/or potential alienation. In addition, instructors who are dramatic and intense in their delivery may be more effective than those who give a droning lecture. From this perspective, provocative techniques are designed to "grab" students psychologically and intellectually, cultivating their curiosity and motivating cognitive and personal growth. As a motivational technique, such an emotive grip on the class leads to intellectual exploration that may transcend traditional lecturing.

I would like to recommend a few guiding principles in formulating provocative teaching techniques as follows:

1. Orient the technique toward the entire class, not just one student.
2. Allow an appropriate pause time for class response.[4] (By placing responsibility on the active learning environment, silence encourages the class to think about the task at hand and conveys expectations for their participation.)
3. Respond to all students' responses.
4. Validate and confirm student attempts to respond or offer an explanation (even if such attempts are incorrect or idiosyncratic).
5. Use the discussion to launch into a formal presentation of the material or to augment existing didactic strategies.

Classroom Examples

Generally, provocative techniques combined with systematic questioning may be applied arbitrarily to any topic.[5] For instance, let's say that a student states a personal belief that many other students in the class also espouse. Upon inquiry into the grounds for the assumption of the belief, the student claims that this is what he was taught by authority figures during childhood. Through provocative systematic questioning, the student realizes that this type of reasoning is an informal fallacy based on an appeal to authority that became conditioned and serves as the grounds for his belief. By having the student reexamine and question the logical grounds for the belief based on his previous method, the truth value of the premises, the validity of the source, and the integrity of the conclusion, this process promotes critical thinking in an active classroom and stimulates discussion and cogent arguments among other students.

Although it is generally better to focus questions toward the entire class, in a case like this, by focusing on one student, others join in to offer competing arguments or supportive rationale that are further examined by the class as a whole. That generally leads to an inclusive process rather than an exclusive centering on one student. In addition, while one student is giving specific reasons for a position or conveying his or her experiences, others have the opportunity to relate their own thoughts or experiences to the student's, which makes for a vibrant class discussion. The approach not only influences greater intellectual awareness and cognitive skill development, but makes the learning process itself a personal pursuit of meaning.

Existence of God

Specific, concrete, or narrowly focused techniques sometimes spark great classroom enthusiasm. I have found that topics involving ethical practices, racial and ethnic diversity, and religious convictions are typically the most fruitful for provocative techniques. For example, issues about the question of God always provoke debate. In one class, while I was lecturing on modern philosophy, students spontaneously volunteered to represent their argumentation about the existence of God in an informal debate. Six students assembled as a panel providing reasons for theism, agnosticism, and atheism, each position represented by two students. That led to an intense classroom discussion that I mediated and supervised, allowing the students to ask and answer questions without allowing any one position or person to monopolize class time. At the end of class, students voted on what they thought to be the strongest arguments grounded in critical thinking rather than ones based on mere conditioned beliefs. The exercise was a perfect entrée to a formal lecture that was to follow.

To illustrate the point that all individuals experience anxiety that becomes manifested in behavior and personality organization throughout the lifespan, I will open the topic with the following technique: "What would you say if I told you that everyone in this room is neurotic?"[6] This provocation often prompts apprehension, defiance, or curiosity, which leads to a discussion and active exploration of the construct under question. I find this technique most useful when introducing the philosophy of psychology, particularly Freud, or theories of human nature.

Parenting and Corporal Punishment

While teaching an ethics course on parenting, I asked the class whether corporal punishment was immoral. Most students believed it was morally acceptable, and some even made a case that it was immoral not to physically discipline children when they commit transgressions, because physical punishment teaches them morals. This situation quickly turned into an opportunity. I asked those who supported corporal punishment to come to the front of the class and face their fellow students. I then asked them to imagine themselves as children who were just beaten for disobeying their parents. I further told them to imagine their peers sitting in front of them as their parents

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and to think about how they are *now* feeling after being punished. After a minute of reflection, one by one I asked each student (child) to tell the class (parents) how they felt about being hit. Many students reported feeling sorrow, guilt, shame, fear, anger, and even hate. Some reported feeling abused and humiliated and stated that their parents were cruel, unloving, violating, and unempathic.

That was a powerful exercise in identification and empathy, and many students came to realize the dubious ethical nature of corporal punishment. This event further led to an extended role-playing exercise in which students formed hypothetical families of four members, each comprised of two parents and two children. Each student was assigned a specific name, gender, and role along with unique background characteristics. Over the weeks, the families were given specific tasks and problems to solve that simulated "real," everyday events that families typically encounter. Each group's solutions were analyzed and compared to the other families', which culminated in a thoughtful exploration of the moral topography of parenting.

As another example, while introducing ethics and value theory, discussing cultural diversity, or individual differences and tolerance, I will proclaim: "Every human being by nature is prejudiced."[7] After approximately four seconds of silence, the class typically responds quite intensely. This usually incites anxiety, defensive anger, or compliant agreement that leads to a fruitful class discussion culminating in mutual understanding. Individuals come to realize that subjective bias, preconceived judgments, and reinforced stereotypes are ubiquitous. The crucial point, however, is to acknowledge this universal condition before students individually can form new concepts and attitudes.

It is very important to note here that when making such general claims, the teacher should have a carefully prepared context for provocation. Making such broad assertions without a prudent and conscientious context may suggest to students that the teacher is prone to make vacuous or ill-founded pronouncements—and it is from just such an undisciplined approach to thinking that teachers ought to wean their students.[8]

Over the years I have found these techniques to be unique and productive in provoking thoughtful inquiry of and self-exploration about important philosophical issues. Students often comment about how much they enjoy these exercises and how they facilitate extracurricular discussion and debate that is important for their personal growth. Provocative exercises may provide a personal utility for self-discovery that departs from the traditional procedures of pedantic pedagogy.

It is vital not to create (either directly or indirectly) a hostile environment. No student should be forced to respond or participate. Consider "ways out" of potentially detrimental situations.

Risk of Provocation

As an inherently stimulating enterprise, philosophy deals with claims that the average person views as bizarre or outlandishly false. The fact is, philosophy ponders subjects that the average person may never even consider. Within this context, the teacher's job is to make philosophy attractive and accessible to students so it may be relevant to their lives. One is constantly confronted with the limitations of conveying difficult subject matter and methodology indigenous to philosophical discourse as well as assessing and negotiating the intellectual aptitude of the students. In addition, the conscientious teacher should be equally vigilant of his or her own personal vulnerabilities that may interfere with successful classroom engagement.

Philosophy is a risk, and so is teaching. Do not be afraid to make the classroom a risk-taking environment. As Dewey reminds us, experimentation leads to success. Allow for spontaneity that breaks the rigid mold of traditional course structure, which may serve to stifle creativity and personal insight. But provocative teaching needs to be used carefully. It is one thing to expose students to particular philosophical positions that challenge their attitudes and lifestyles, yet it is another for their teacher, their guide, to encroach upon their psychological security and emotional safety. Of course, we have our own philosophic identifications that will inevitably be introduced in class. The task is, however, to present one's own views while bracketing one's biases and prejudices that other philosophic disciplines are likely to point out.

To what degree is one's own philosophy truly distinguished from oneself? The undeniable fact is that, as instructors, we cannot avoid projecting our own identifications onto others, and such projections should be responsibly balanced. Indeed, that can truly be difficult. Furthermore, it is very difficult to provide concrete procedures on how far to go in provoking students. Because we are all subjective human beings with our own sense of individuality, there is no golden mean or step-by-step method to follow. That must be left to personal judgment and discretion.

When we examine controversial issues in class, we should be respectful of individual and cultural differences that may influence certain beliefs and practices, while we still maintain intellectual integrity. It should be a tacit assumption for students that acts of provocation are designed to bring rational and emotional constructs under the rubric of knowledge. No provocation should be executed merely for "shock value." Because some students may feel intimidated by philosophical questions, the professor should try to be sensitive to the students' cognitive

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acumen as well as their emotional development. Sometimes, students who are overly emotional, rigid, or vulnerable to a particular topic simply need to be reminded that the discussion at hand is only an object of intellectual investigation and certainly not a personal attack.

It is vital not to create (either directly or indirectly) a hostile environment for learning. No student should be forced to respond or participate. This could be easily viewed as malicious, shameful, or exploitative. Consider personal security and "ways out" of potentially detrimental situations. Be sensitive toward individuals who may have suffered trauma. If this is suspected or disclosed in the course of an exercise, do not pressure anyone; simply respect the other's "safety zones," validate their experience, and move on to the next position or topic. Insensitivity or perfunctory responses to personal disclosures can be experienced as abusive and thus may re-create an earlier traumatic event. One should never subject a student to such potentially precarious psychological conditions *even if it is under the guise of reason.* As a guideline, strive for neutrality through empathy; and if need be, step back from the personal realm to the philosophical.

On the other hand, although some students will feel uncomfortable, that should not be the reason for avoiding provocative techniques. By approaching sensitive issues that are directly anchored to personal identity or ways of life, you communicate to students that you care about their well being, and that is why you challenge them.

One learns the most about oneself through *discomfort.* By leaning into discomfort, the student discovers the reward of achieving personal insight. It is important to note that both the material itself and its presentation can cause discomfort within the classroom. If done tactfully, however, with caring and empathy, provocation can lead to knowledge and personal growth, another movement on the ladder toward wisdom. While most of the time the goal of instruction is inclusion (so that the class and the teacher feel on the same side in their exploration of the subject), it still may be necessary to introduce an opposing stance in order to pique a more thorough examination of the material. In fact, it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide students with all perspectives to an issue (when possible) as well as an exegesis, and some of these perspectives will unavoidably be distressing.

It is easy to confuse the use of provocation by seeing it as tantamount to an aggressive attack on students' beliefs. Even though it is true that provocation is confrontational, that does not mean that it is aggressive. Of course, the boundary may be at times cumbersome to maintain, for provocation is inherently risky. When we confront the class or a particular student, our intention should be to illuminate and cultivate insight, not to disparage or dismiss the student's views, for this can be easily interpreted by students as a dismissal of them. Within the proper context, confrontation is merely approaching the problem or issue head-on and providing feedback, while *at the same time confirming the student's* "attempt" by validating their need to think a certain way; thereby affirming their sense of self. This leads to a positive role model identification marked by respect and solicitude for them as persons.

Nothing is worse than invalidating and debasing a student. We teachers are in a privileged position of power and authority, which should be positively channeled rather than used, even unconsciously, as a weapon. Provoking students to develop and fulfill their possibilities, I argue, is the core responsibility of an effective teacher—not to see students as objects to be used and disposed of because they do not fit one's desired profile, or merely as a mass conglomeration.

One may question the amount of discomfort one can legitimately cause students in the name of good pedagogy or self-knowledge. Nothing in life is devoid of conflict or uneasiness, particularly personal development. Discomfort itself is knowledge. Professors who feel that the goal of teaching is merely to impart information and not foster valuation are divorced from their responsibility to contribute to the overall personal growth of their students. A good teacher is someone who disseminates information effectively. But a great teacher is someone who *moves* you as a human being. What could be more ethical than this?

Conclusion

Provocative techniques may be constructed and adapted to complement the introduction of a variety of distinct topics in general education courses regardless of one's discipline or pedagogical persuasion. Of course, no method will reach everyone. We must find a method that suits our personalities and didactic styles. Instead of traditional lecturing, the combined use of provocative questions and statements that force the class to respond to a particular issue may have more impact and personal meaning than formal approaches. That is especially salient with younger undergraduates who are generally intellectually curious, demonstrate some interest in the course but may have enrolled merely to satisfy general requirements, or who are entrenched in the psychological priorities of individual and social development. Furthermore, the use of probing and systematic questioning gears students toward an introspective analysis of their personal beliefs, not only grounded in reason, but also linked to emotional and psychological motives that influence their perception of cause and effect.

I have found that these techniques motivate students to explore, question, and actively seek out truth, not just to accept information passively as unquestioned dogma. In addition, one will notice progress in their critical thinking skills over the length of the course. Rather than professing an impetuous position based upon unreflective conditioning, students offer more solid argumentation with developed rationale for their beliefs and attitudes. I believe that this process of teaching itself can be more important than the knowledge disseminated through traditional pedagogy.

More important, students often find personal values behind their beliefs that they directly apply to their lives. It is often the case that what students remember the most about you is not your words, but rather the way you relate to them. The goal of teaching is not merely to bestow information or nurture skills in critical thinking, but to set an example of what it means to be. For teaching is a way of being.

NOTES

1. A different version of this paper was delivered at the Eleventh International Work-

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shop and Conference on Teaching Philosophy, Norfolk, Va., 2 August 1996. I wish to thank the conference participants for their invaluable contributions as well as Jeffrey Tlumak, Department of Philosophy, Vanderbilt University; and Eugene Kelly, Social Sciences Department, New York Institute of Technology, for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

2. For a thorough discussion of these multidisciplinary issues, see M. E. Gorman, A. Law, and T. Lindegren, "Making Students Take a Stand: Active Learning in Introductory Psychology." *Teaching of Psychology* 8:3 (1981): 164–66; R. E. Mayer, "Cognitive Views on Creativity: Creative Teaching for Creative Learning," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 14:13 (1989): 203–11; G. D. Miller, *An Idiosyncratic Ethics, or the Lauramachaean Ethics* (Amsterdam/Atlanta, Rodopi, 1994); G. D. Miller and C. P. Pristscher, *On Education and Values* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995); and J. C. Overholser, "Socrates in the Classroom," *Social Studies* 83:2 (1992): 77–82.

3. Cf. R. J. Bonnstetter, "Active Learning Often Starts with a Question," *Journal of College Science Teaching* 18:2 (1988): 95–7.

4. It has been noted that questions used with an appropriate pause for classroom response are very effective in increasing student involvement. See Bonnstetter.

5. Mayer and Overholser (see note 2) outline how systematic questioning facilitates inductive reasoning as well as creative learning that may be used concurrently with provocative strategies.

6. This is adapted from Freud's dictum. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, standard edition, vols. 15–16 (London: Hogarth Press, 1916–1917, 358).

7. Cf. J. Mills and J. Polanowski, *The Ontology of Prejudice* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, in press).

8. From personal correspondence with Eugene Kelly, Social Sciences Department, New York Institute of Technology.

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