

Kant on Teaching Philosophy

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In 1765, Kant issued an advertisement for the four lecture courses he would be delivering in the winter semester of 1765/66 (Metaphysics, Logic, Ethics, and Physical Geography).[1] Instead of merely outlining the course syllabuses, Kant prefaced the document with what would nowadays be called a 'statement of teaching philosophy'. [2] As far as I am aware, this is the only place where he explains his approach to teaching, and it is an approach which (apart from the first point below) is remarkably consistent with what professional educationalists consider to be best practice in the 21st century.

1. Students too young for philosophy

Kant starts off on the wrong foot by telling his prospective students that they are too young to study philosophy, since their understanding and reason are not yet mature enough for it. Being taught philosophy too young is the cause of:

the precocious garrulousness of young thinkers, which is blinder than any other form of self-conceit, and less curable than ignorance.

It is unclear from the rest of the document how far Kant believed the problem could be overcome. If he seriously believed, with Plato for example,[3] that there is a minimum age below which philosophy cannot be taught without doing more harm than good, then he should not have been teaching philosophy to undergraduates at all - particularly since they were even younger than is the norm today. If he merely believed that there was a problem which could be addressed by more enlightened teaching methods, then he could have been less patronising, and given his students more positive encouragement. He should have addressed them directly, rather than in the third person,[4] and he should have told them, for example, that they were embarking on a peculiarly difficult but rewarding course of study, which he would help them through. All in all, I think his view must have been that it is difficult, but not impossible, to teach philosophy to young people, provided the right method is used.

2. Philosophy and employability

Kant held that there was a natural order in the development of human understanding, which teaching must follow:

The natural progress of human knowledge consists in the understanding:

- first training itself to arrive at clear judgments on the basis of experience;
- then attaining concepts through these judgments;

- then knowing these concepts through reason, in relation to their foundations and consequences;
- and finally knowing them as a coherent whole by means of science.

Teaching must follow exactly the same route.

His implicit message is that, to be a genuine philosopher, you must have attained the last of these stages. This is **not** relevant to employability, because Kant agreed with Plato that philosophy should not be a paid profession (despite the fact that Kant himself received a salary as a philosopher):

you will clearly see that it is very unnatural for philosophy to be a paid profession, since it contradicts its essential nature if it accommodates itself to the craziness of market forces or the rule of fashion.

Instead:

by its very nature, it should essentially be reckoned only as an adornment of life, and, so to speak, one of its dispensable embellishments.

One of the evils of modern society was that people considered it necessary to be a sophisticated intellectual in order to advance in life. There was therefore pressure on the universities to give students a semblance of philosophical wisdom, without going through the stages necessary for their intellectual development. The consequences were dire:

the students pick up a sort of reason before their understanding is fully developed. They wear borrowed scientific knowledge, which is, so to speak, draped over them rather than having grown within them. Consequently, their mental capacity is as undeveloped as it was before, but at the same time it has been seriously corrupted by the delusion of wisdom. This is the reason why you often come across intellectuals (especially academics) who show little understanding, and why universities send more dull wits out into the world than any other state institution.

This is strong language indeed, and one wonders what Kant's colleagues would have thought of his addressing his students in such terms.

So far, Kant has stressed the irrelevance of philosophy to employability. The other side of the coin is that all the stages of intellectual development necessary to become a philosopher are highly relevant to employability, except for the final stage:

It is expected that a teacher will educate students first to use their **understanding**, then to use their **reason**, and finally to become **academics**. Most students do not become academics. So the advantage of such a method is that, even if students never reach the final stage, their education has made them better trained and more intellectually accomplished for a non-university career.

Indeed, university teachers are neglecting their duty if they do not inculcate general intellectual skills:

The trust of the state is being abused if teachers fail to increase the intellectual abilities of the young people in their charge, and educate them to **their own** more mature insight in future, but instead deceive them with a supposedly already complete philosophy, which was thought up for

their benefit by other people.

So Kant believed that philosophy had a special role to play in educating students for any career outside the university.

3. Philosophy as *sui generis*

Kant makes a sharp distinction between the teaching of philosophy and that of other disciplines, on the grounds that other disciplines have a body of knowledge which can be taught, whereas philosophy does not. There is no text-book of philosophy, because there are no philosophical facts. As he puts it:

Many of those who have learned history, jurisprudence, mathematics, and so on, nevertheless decide on their own accord that they have not yet learned enough to teach it to others. On the other hand, why are there so many people who can seriously imagine themselves, in addition to their other business, being perfectly able to pontificate about logic, morality, and the like, should they wish to get involved in such trivialities? The reason is because in the former sciences there is a common standard, whereas in the latter everyone has their own.

The mistaken belief that there is a body of philosophical knowledge which can be transmitted to students is:

the origin of an illusory science, which passes for genuine currency only among particular people in a particular place, but is rejected everywhere else.

If Kant had been writing after he had developed his critical philosophy, he would have had to modify this claim. Although he retained the view that *metaphysics* cannot possibly be a science, he came to believe that the synthetic a priori knowledge contained in the Transcendental Analytic could be taught as a systematic doctrine like any other science. Nevertheless, what he says about the teaching of philosophy in general would still remain true of the teaching of metaphysics.

What makes Kant's position on the teaching of philosophy particularly audacious is not that he thought it worth teaching at all (despite there being no philosophical facts), nor even that he thought it ought to be taught differently from other disciplines, but rather the implication that it is the *only* discipline which can deliver a university education worthy of the name. Teachers of other disciplines may find this claim outrageous; but when we look at what Kant actually says, it is remarkable that his recommendations for philosophy are very similar to what educationalists recommend for *all* university disciplines today. Kant's claim would seem much less outrageous if he had said that philosophy is unique in that it *cannot* be taught by traditional didactic methods without turning it into a pseudo-science, and that other disciplines would be taught *better* if they used the methods which are *necessary* for philosophy.

4. Kant's recommendations

Kant's first recommendation (already mentioned above) is that students should not be presented with highly abstract concepts until they have matured enough to understand them. This means starting by making judgments about particular cases, and only later bringing them together into a theoretical structure. This is good advice for any discipline, and it anticipates modern educational techniques, such as problem-based learning, and the use of case studies. To give just one example, it is notoriously difficult to teach statistics to students of psychology or economics, if it is presented as an abstract system which has to be mastered before it is applied. It is much better to start by introducing individual statistical techniques as and when they are needed for solving particular problems, and only later to put them into a theoretical context. Much the same might be said of formal logic.

Kant's second recommendation (also already mentioned above) is that teachers should remember that only a small proportion of their students are going to become academics. They should be taught in such a way that **all** students develop their understanding so as to benefit them in any later career. This is also essential for students who are destined to become academics, since they will become bad academics if their heads are filled with abstractions before they are ready for them - postgraduate training can be left till later.

Again this is good advice. Some academics think of university as a training school for future academics, and regard anyone who fails to obtain a good 2.1 as a failure. Such an attitude has always been unsustainable, and it is even less sustainable in an age of state-funded mass higher education. As Kant was aware, philosophy is the ideal subject for developing the understanding, or, as we might put it today, for training students in 'transferable' or 'key' intellectual skills and attributes. The corollary is that these skills should be made explicit; that teaching methods should focus on developing them through the subject content of the discipline; and that students should be assessed positively on the extent to which they have acquired such skills (as well as knowledge), and not negatively on the extent to which they have failed to make the grade as potential academics.

Kant's third recommendation is that teachers should take into account the level of understanding which students have actually attained, and not assume that they have the same level of understanding as the teacher:

But all this must be proportionate to the level of understanding which the preceding exercise must necessarily have brought about in the students, and not to the level of understanding which the teacher observes (or thinks he observes) in himself, and which he even falsely assumes to be present in his students.

This may seem obvious, but it is a common failing of teachers in all disciplines to assume that students are, or ought to be, capable of understanding anything which they themselves can understand. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in the post-Humboldtian university, teaching is supposed to be conducted in the context of the latest research. However, this ideal can be realised without assuming, for example, that students are capable of understanding the latest articles in journals intended for an audience of professional academics.

Kant's fourth recommendation comes in the form of a sound-bite:

students should not learn **thoughts** - they should learn to **think**.

This expresses the essence of Kant's educational philosophy, and it is in complete accordance with the modern stress on active learning. Students should not be the passive recipients of the thoughts of others, but they should acquire the ability to think for themselves. Graduates who have acquired this ability will continue as life-long learners, whereas those who have merely learned what they have been taught are unlikely to develop further.

Kant's fifth recommendation is another sound-bite:

the teacher should not **carry** [students], but **lead** them, if he wants them to be destined to **make progress** by themselves in future.

In other words, students will not make any progress after they leave university if they passively follow what they have been told. The teacher must lead them, in the sense that they are guided to make their own progress. This is essentially the same as the modern dictum (**horribile dictu**) that the good teacher should be 'a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage'.

Kant's sixth recommendation is that university teaching has to undo the damage done to students by the way they have been taught at school:

Students come fresh from school, where the method of teaching accustomed them to *learning*. Now they think they will *learn philosophy*, but this is impossible, since they must actually *learn to philosophise*.

I am sure that most of today's philosophers will sympathise with Kant's complaint. Pupils at school are trained to give the best possible answers in examinations, at the expense of thinking actively for themselves. There are exceptions to this generalisation, but the pressure of league tables makes it increasingly risky for schoolteachers to encourage originality. When school leavers arrive at university, especially in subjects such as philosophy, they are confronted with a totally different philosophy of education, in which they are expected to involve themselves actively in their own learning, and manage their own time. They find it difficult to accommodate themselves to an academic culture in which philosophy is something you *do*, rather than something you are *taught*. Many of them assume that the curriculum will be delivered to them through their ears in lectures, and they flounder when they are expected to read difficult texts critically, and to think for themselves in discussion and when writing essays. Unfortunately, Kant doesn't provide any specific recommendations for bridging the interface between school and university.

Kant's seventh recommendation is that:

The distinctive method of teaching philosophy is *zetetic*, as some of the ancient philosophers called it (from the Greek *zetein*), meaning 'enquiring'; and it only becomes *dogmatic*, or 'definitive' in various of its branches when people's reason has already been more practised.

It is revealing that Kant uses the term *zetetic* rather than *dialectic*. In the first *Critique*, he uses the Platonic term *dialectic* for a procedure which demonstrates that the natural urge of reason towards transcendent truth leads it to an impasse - even though Plato himself saw dialectic as the means for attaining truth. The term *zetetic* comes from Sextus Empiricus, who held, like Kant after him, that we are compelled to believe in the reality of phenomena, but that we can never satisfy our desire to know noumena (and the terminology of phenomena/noumena is there in Sextus). The method of thesis and antithesis is exactly the sceptics' method of balancing the arguments in favour of a dogmatic claim with equal and opposite arguments against it. Sextus also sees philosophy as an activity, and he says that one of the names of the sceptical school is:

the *zetetic* school, because its followers do not merely think, but actively enquire.^[5]

Kant doesn't specify which branches of philosophy become legitimately dogmatic, but he clearly thinks that students should learn in a *zetetic* way until their reason is fully developed. The implication is that, even if philosophy teachers have sufficient grounds for supposing that they themselves have access to the objective truth, they should not teach it dogmatically, but they should lead their students towards it zetetically.

Kant's final recommendation is that any course text should be used, not as an authority, but as something which should be thought through and argued with:

the philosophical author used as a primary text for teaching should not be treated as the archetype of judgment, but only as an occasion for making one's own judgment about him, or even against him. The method of thinking through the text and drawing conclusions from it oneself is essentially what students want to be proficient at. Not only can it be useful to them, but any definite insights acquired at the same time must be treated as incidental consequences, and they only have to plant their fertile roots within themselves in order to enjoy an abundant harvest.

I am not convinced that all students *want* to be proficient at thinking through the text and drawing their own

conclusions from it. Many would prefer to be told what to think. Nevertheless, Kant makes the fundamental educational point that university students, especially in a subject like philosophy, ought to apply their own thinking to texts, and not merely accept them as delivering a curriculum to be absorbed passively.

Kant is even more radical when he says that any insights acquired are incidental. His thesis is that education is primarily about developing intellectual competence, and that subject knowledge is relatively unimportant. This again is fully in accordance with current thinking.

5. Accommodating the ideal to reality

Despite Kant's bold claims about teaching methods, there is no evidence that he actually implemented them. Like everyone else, he delivered traditional lectures.

He was operating in a climate in which teaching methods were closely controlled by the state. At the beginning of the document, he says that the problem of teaching philosophy within these constraints 'cannot be completely overcome'. At the end he says that:

Only extreme necessity, which has power even over philosophy, can force it to conform to what is generally approved.

I take this as a confession on Kant's part that managerial constraints prevented him from implementing his ideal philosophical education. A quarter of a millennium later, we must ensure that similar managerial constraints do not prevent us from fulfilling Kant's ideals in the 21st century.

Notes

- [back](#) G. Hartenstein (ed.) *Immanuel Kant's Samtliche Werke*, Vol. 2 (Leipzig, Leopold Voss, 1867), 313-316; Kaniglich Preuischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Kant's Werke*, Vol. 2 (Berlin, 1905), 303-313; I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, tr. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 287-300. Quotations are from my own translation, available at:
- [back](#) As a teacher of philosophy, I find this expression profoundly irritating, because of the ambiguity between 'teaching *philosophy*', and '*teaching* philosophy'. It also makes it almost impossible to use a search engine to find anything about teaching *philosophy*, since most of the hits are statements of *teaching* philosophy on the websites of US academics.
- [back](#) Plato set the minimum age as high as 50 (Republic, 540a), though Socrates was perfectly happy to discuss philosophy with youngsters such as Theaetetus. In the late 1980s there was a public debate as to whether philosophy should be taught at A-level, with some professional philosophers arguing that, although students were mature enough at 18, they were not at 16. In my view, the reverse is almost the case, because of the baneful effects of teaching methods at sixth form. Some of the most exciting philosophical discussions I have witnessed have involved primary schoolchildren using the methods of Matthew Lipman.
- [back](#) As, for example, does John Stewart at Aberdeen in 1748: 'Some advantages of the study of mathematicks, with directions for prosecuting the same', 10-11, quoted in Paul B. Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment* (Aberdeen University Press, 1993), 20.
- [back](#) *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I.7.

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