Walking the Talk: Teaching Toward 'Living a Philosophically Informed Life'
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Introduction

Twenty years ago, as I began my philosophy career at Elon, I was told that only one student in the previous ten years had gone on to study philosophy in graduate school. Therefore, rather than striving to serve the needs of that rare student, we would instead aim to design both the major and each course so that participating in either would make a significant and positive impact on the life of that student, irrespective of his or her chosen career path. This reorientation liberated us from professional and traditional expectations regarding both course content and pedagogy. My department continues to encourage experimentation in both of these dimensions.

But doesn't everyone hope or expect that our teaching will benefit our students? Yes; but mostly it takes the form of a "promissory note"—something like, "If you learn this information, I promise you that *someday*, *somehow*, you will find it beneficial." Once I began to doubt the reality of that promise, I decided to aspire to a higher standard of effectiveness. I set out teach philosophy in such a way that I could both immediately observe the effects and also have some basis for thinking that its effects would be long-lasting. In this presentation, I will outline three pedagogical projects that were inspired by this self-imposed lofty challenge; and I will identify some potential ethical difficulties with each.

Mediation Skills as Ethical Life Skills

Fifteen years ago, I took mediation training and subsequently, while volunteering as a mediator, it dawned on me that a mediator's skills and sensitivities are both philosophical and basic ethical life skills. I decided to incorporate a mediation training module in my introductory level ethics sections.

Exploring the field of ADR (alternative dispute resolution) has significantly enhanced my philosophic instruction.

Superficially, mediation appears to ask merely that you guide disputants through a fairly simple sequence of steps: introduce everyone, describe the process, listen to each side's story, brain-storm possible solutions, and facilitate a win-win agreement. But mediation is actually an incredibly dense and dynamic second-order experience. It begins before the disputants arrive. A mediator must exercise strategic awareness regarding the placement of chairs in the room (avoiding a face-to-face orientation) so as to minimize the chances for escalating emotional interactions. A mediator must remain strictly neutral between the disputants. This requires mindfulness about one's body language, the terminology in one's questions, and how questions are framed. Furthermore, a mediator must practice deep and reflective listening—attending not only to the narrative elements but also to the disputant's emotional experience—and to do this equally for the stories of both disputants. Finally, after conducting a brainstorming session, the mediator must resist the overwhelming temptation to suggest alternatives as the disputants work toward a "win-win" agreement.

Role-playing helps students acclimate to a distinct set of skills, dispositions and sensitivities. For example, they will be sensitive to whether conditions are ripe for discussing and resolving a dispute. Additionally, following Stephen Covey, they will "seek first to understand, then to be understood." Deep listening helps them to attend not only to what a person is saying but also to the emotional features of the situation. Following Fischer and Ury,[1] they will focus on *interests* rather than *positions.* Although these skills are not the traditional virtues, they resemble virtues in that they are dispositions of character that can be acquired by habituation[2] and are conducive to one's well-being.

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[1] Fisher, Roger and William Ury, <u>Getting to Yes: Netotiating Agreement Without Giving In,</u> 2nd edition (New York: Penguin, 1991).
[2] Aristotle, <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u>, Book II, Chapter 1.

My aspiration drives me to do far more than merely teach *about* these things. By requiring a structured sequence of role-playing exercises, I fully intend to habituate my students so that the skills, sensitivities, and dispositions of a mediator become second nature to them. Although I can't—practically and morally—assess my students on how they actually live their lives, I admit that I am doing my best to heavily influence their future behavior.   Ultimately, I assess them by their ability to inhabit the role of a mediator and to deftly manage a mediation.[3]

However, does my direct intention of habituating my students to specific ways of being cross an ethical line? Someone once described this project as something akin to the conditioning that Alex received in *A Clockwork Orange!* But, is this project all that different from an experiential learning project that require students to, for example, work in homeless shelters or to go without TV for a week? Does remaining in the class after reading the syllabus constitute informed consent? What determines when we must offer an opt-out provision?

Crafting a Meaningful Life

Two years ago, I began offering a course entitled "Crafting a Meaningful Life." After clarifying what questions we will *not* be addressing, I invite an exploration of two tentative claims. First, meaning (in a life) is not something that we create — it is not "out there" to be found, nor is it given by some external agent, structure or process. Second, I introduce the notion of a "narrative conception of the self" (see, for example, Charles Taylor[4], Daniel Dennett[5], Alasdair MacIntyre[6], Jerome Bruner[7] and Dan McAdams[8]) and propose that these thinkers can be interpreted as suggesting that we can enhance the meaning in our lives by focusing on its narrative structure. Roughly, your life can have more meaning if viewed as a

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[3] Student's grades are, in part, based on their ability to conduct a simulated mediation. A note of warning—since each mediation requires about 30 minutes, this can be a serious time commitment.

[4] Taylor, Charles <u>Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity </u>(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992).

[5] Dennett, Daniel <u>Consciousness Explained</u> (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), pp. 412-430.

[6] MacIntyre, Alasdair <u>After Virtue</u> 2nd Edition, (Notre Dame, In.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 204-225.

[7] Bruner, Jerome <u>Actual Mind, Possible Worlds (</u>Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986) and <u>Acts of Meaning (</u>Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990).

[8] McAdams, Dan P. <u>The Stories We Live By; Personal Myths and the Making of the Self </u>(New York: The Guilford Press, 1993).

novel—with you simultaneously being its author, narrator, main character, and reader. Each of us has

the authorial responsibility to shape one's character, to manage the plot line, to choose the goals and

quests that are to be taken up. This storying and re-storying your life is the art of living.

Although we read some philosophic material,[9] this class is noteworthy here because it includes a

"life story" assignment, which includes these five elements:

1. students complete an extensive "life story interview," which involves rendering about a dozen of their most memorable episodes,[10]
2. they write a "This I Believe" essay,[11]
3. borrowing from Stephen Covey, they write a personal mission statement,[12] and
4. their own (hopefully quite distant) eulogy,[13] and
5. to write an extensive essay that reflected on all of the above.

Many students—perhaps as many as one-quarter—have indicated that this "life story" project was "the

best thing that they've done in college." That in itself makes me want to do this more frequently. But,

again I have some serious moral qualms about this assignment.

Honestly, in this course I feel like I'm playing with fire. My assignments expose student's

vulnerabilities in a way that demand more care, concern and personal attention than I can possibly

provide in a class of thirty and across a three-week term. Although this course generates the strongest

positive feedback of any course that I've *ever* taught, it also—clearly—moves some students in a darker

direction. I worry that I am too directly engaged with my student's sense of self and that the materials

and assignments risk destabilizing the philosophical/psychological structures that enable them to keep

going in life. Essentially, I worry about catalyzing a suicide. It is palpably clear to me that this course is

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[9] As a primary texts, I used David Benatar's Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions 2nd edition, (London: Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2010) and Terry Eagleton's Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press,2007).

[10] For details, see both: http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/ docs/Interviewrevised95.pdf and http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/instruments/interview/.

[11] I got this idea from Edward R. Murrow and NPR.

[12] Covey, Stephen The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic (New York: Fireside Book, 1990), pp. 128-143.

[13] Covey, Stephen The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic (New York: Fireside Book, 1990), pp. 96-7.

having an immediate and likely lasting effect in my student's lives; I only hope that no one ever decides to pay the ultimate price for such effectiveness.

Philosophical Counseling

Philosophical counseling constitutes a challenge that professional philosophers and graduate programs should take seriously. The basic idea goes something like this. Living a human life presents each of us with a variety of important and difficult problems. It is commonplace to reach out to others for help in coping with our problems. A great deal of assistance seeking and giving occurs between non-professionals—as happens, for example, when we turn to friends, siblings, parents or colleagues for advice, for a sounding board, or even just to vent. On the other hand, some challenges prompt us to seek professional assistance. For example, we seek out doctors, lawyers, financial advisors, and mechanics when their expertise is needed.

There is a special category of issues that lead many people seek advice or help from those who have professional expertise in religion or psychology. No doubt, there are circumstances where this is precisely the appropriate thing to do. However, many such issues—particularly those that are conceptual, metaphysical, existential, or moral—might, on reflection, actually call for the specific expertise of a philosopher. It is time for professional philosophers to acknowledge that we have a set of skills and a base of knowledge that can be directly relevant to some of life's challenges.

Consider the following examples. Suppose that you are trying to make a decision and you are stuck using a particular set of concepts or trapped inside a particular way of framing the issue. A philosophical consultation could help you examine the concepts or reframe the issue in a way that opens up new possibilities. Suppose that you are facing an ethical dilemma. A philosophic counselor could help you see a richer array of considerations or perhaps see more deeply into the principles that are in play, which likely would result in opening up a new possibilities or allow you to have greater confidence in or warranted satisfaction with your ultimate decision. Finally, suppose that a person is

experiencing a classic existential crisis. Since this typically involves doubts about religion, this is again

precisely where seeking advice from a professional philosopher would be most appropriate.[14]

There are two crucial points to be made here. First, the sorts of problems that I've just

described are not instances of mental illness nor do they signal any sort of underlying flaw. Thus,

philosophers can and should avoid following psychology in adopting a medical model for our work.

Second, for a variety of historical reasons, professional philosophers have failed to step up to the

challenges of this domain. This "human services" vacuum has only encouraged religious and

psychological practitioners to provide *philosophic* counseling in our absence. It is time for us

philosophers to take up the challenge of re-discovering what our field has to offer.

Many philosophers hesitate over the notion of philosophic counseling. Some simply need

imaginative encouragement, while others hesitate over terminological connotations. Some doubt

whether "applied philosophy" can be genuinely philosophical. But others—perhaps being inspired by

the saying "first do no harm"—worry about the fact that there are likely better and worse ways of

providing philosophical services and not everyone will have the ability to do it well. But, as with all

emerging fields, these considerations are simply arguments in favor of a broad ranging research

program. Professional philosophers should be encouraged to practice a wide array of philosophical

counseling approaches and techniques and to study and report on what they discover.[15] Conferences

should be held and dissertations should be written exploring this domain. Graduate programs should

start training graduate students to deliver philosophic services to those who need our help.[16]

I want to conclude this section by sharing a personal experience that I believe will resonate with

many others. I suspect that each of you have had the experience of chatting with a student in your

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[14] See, for example the work of Emmy Van Deurzen and Ernesto Spinelli. For a good summary of this domain, see Mick
Cooper's Existential Therapies (Los Angeles: Sage Pub., 2003).

[15] This is already starting to happen. For details, start with this list: http://www.appa.edu/bbm.htm.

[16] I have only just begun experimenting with ways to incorporate the vision of philosophical counseling in my undergraduate
teaching and, thus, I don't have any well developed assignments to share. Currently, I have encouraged a class to write
dialogue where one character asks their roommate for advice regarding an appropriate philosophical issue. But this is only a
start.

office and of having the topic stray beyond what is directly related to the content of your course. The student decides to share a personal struggle. You respond by sharing some of your life experiences, some of the lessons that you've learned and some of the wisdom that you've acquired. I, for one, cherish those encounters. These exchanges are often more deeply gratifying than what I accomplish in the classroom. I often walk away from such discussions thinking, "*That* was me at my best as a philosopher." *There* my training, my skills, my knowledge and my experiences came together and were useful. I wish my culture and my profession had developed institutionally so that I might have a career making such contributions. Perhaps you share such a longing and are willing to join in making it a possibility.

Concluding Remarks – Taking up the Challenge

When a student returns from fall break and reports that they practiced what they learned in mediation training on a parent—with whom they had a history of poorly handled conflicts—and that my instruction, literally, changed their life, I am personally gratified and pedagogically vindicated. When a senior tells me that the "life story" project is the most valuable thing that they've done in college, I am personally gratified and pedagogically vindicated. When students seek me out for help in coping with some of life's most vexing problems and I am able to share my wisdom and use my philosophic skills and knowledge to help them see differently, I am deeply gratified. I can only hope that the projects described in this paper will inspire you to take up the challenge of teaching philosophy so that it actually will enable your students to live philosophically enhanced lives.