

Teaching Philosophy
Joseph M. Forte, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Rivier University, Nashua, NH
jforte@rivier.edu

One of my major research interests is the craft of leading oneself or someone else out of ignorance and toward truth. In this way, my scholarship informs my teaching and the other way around. I accept as a premise in my teaching and my scholarship thereof that one cannot put knowledge into another human being as though one were putting sight into blind eyes (Plato, *Republic*). As a result, I am constantly working on new ways to improve my efforts at leading students to discover truth for themselves. There are no silver bullets here. To assume that any one class format is *the* way for students to engage in the sort of rich inquiry that leads to life-long learning is to commit the fallacy of oversimplified causality. I therefore incorporate an ever-changing range of in class and out of class activities and assignments, all tailored to the particular needs of my students and our topics.

The evidence I consider on an ongoing basis, to inform me about what changes are needed, includes student evaluations, peer and supervisor observation feedback, the quality of students' work, and of course classroom vibe (for lack of a better word). I will occasionally conduct informal surveys from students as well.

In order to be as inclusive as possible, I favor a variety of assignment types and in-class activities, while keeping universal design principles in mind. Based on evidence from past courses, my students thrive the most when class sessions are devoted to large group discussions. However, favoring such a format exclusively and using oral skills as the sole basis for grades would result in a negative and unfair experience for students who are naturally introverted or who experience a great deal of anxiety during public speaking. For these reasons, I also include the activities described below and I never base a student's grade entirely on one type of assessment. Final grades are always based on a combination of written work, discussion participation grades, exams, and attendance, and sometimes oral presentations as well as group video creation projects, explained more below.

The most common format for my class sessions at Rivier University, Boston College, and The Catholic University of America has involved a mix of mini-lectures and discussion (both small and large group). I typically deliver such mini-lectures as my own contributions to our ongoing discussion, rather than as standalone aspects of the class. At the above universities, I have occasionally employed in-class competitions, such as debates or illustration games, as methods of intensifying student engagement in content. The in-class games I've developed include my Platonic Myth-Drawing Competition, Philosophy Jeopardy, and Capital Punishment Debate.

At Northeast Catholic College/Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, all classes were entirely in the Socratic seminar discussion format, as mandated by the administration.

In my logic classes at Bridgewater State University, half of the sessions typically consisted of lecture and brief discussion while the other half consisted of students doing group work. This work usually involved reviewing homework exercises they completed, for the purpose of uncovering errors and

filling in knowledge gaps, as well as motivating the thoughtful and thorough completion of homework outside of class.

Though I've never taught a course with a heavy emphasis on lectures, I've given many public lectures over the years and would welcome the opportunity to teach such a class one day.

One in-class activity that stands out is the following: When teaching Plato's *Republic* to undergraduates in lower-level classes at CUA and BC, I had the students deliver group, in-class presentations with visuals that portrayed Plato's myths and allegories in ways that speak to a modern audience new to philosophy. Students used gifs, videos, tables, charts, blackboard drawings, and even acting to convey the philosophical complexity of Plato's images in engaging ways to their classmates. Their creative efforts hopefully kindled a spark for learning in them, and definitely provided added motivation to spend time reading and thinking about Plato, whose philosophical richness increases proportionately to time spent reading, re-reading, and re-thinking his work.

One assignment I've developed, called "Philosophy Connections," asks students to meaningfully connect topics of the course with content outside of the course discipline—especially pop culture. In my online metaphysics classes, students participate in Canvas discussion fora in which they're encouraged to draw philosophically rich connections between *The Matrix* and the metaphysics of Plato and Descartes, as well as between the film *Inception* and Augustine's philosophy of time.

Through unofficial and official evaluations, I've learned that my students appreciate creative and unique assignments, like the in-class games, graded discussions, and "Philosophy Connections" that I offer each term. I also made one of my logic classes into an experiential-learning class by focusing on assessments that required students to use their logic skills to critique arguments made in the public sphere. Some of my students presented their critiques at the Mid-Year Symposium for undergraduate research at Bridgewater State University, marking the first time in recent years that logic students had a presence at this event showcasing the research talents of BSU students.

By means of student feedback, I have also learned that undergraduates greatly appreciate review sessions. They provide another chance for students to receive guidance about potentially difficult material. These classes challenge them to be active learners in new ways. For instance, some of my review classes are intensified versions of the class discussions we regularly have. They are intensified because each student is graded on each contribution they provide to the discussion, and each student receives an overall grade for their contribution, roughly equal to a quiz grade. I ask a mix of open-ended questions and questions that necessitate rigorous textual examination. Other review classes involve playing "Philosophy Jeopardy," in which the students compete in teams to answer questions that review the content of the preceding several weeks. Both of these types of review sessions are essentially student-led, since they are doing most of the talking and thinking, while I provoke them with questions.

Innovative adjustments to my Rivier courses include the incorporation of mainstream films and TV shows into Theories of Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues assignments (always assigned as out of class work—we do not watch films during class time) and a group video project for CMI inspired by the Davis Teaching and Technology grant I received in 2022-2023. The video assignment was so well liked by my direct supervisor and colleagues that I was asked to present it as a keynote to the summer 2023 faculty professional development workshop.

The aspect of my courses that students consistently express the most satisfaction with in their evaluations is class discussions. I take this as a sign that I'm conducting class discussions well and that my ongoing decision to spend most of our class time in discussion (as opposed to lecturing, in-class writing, games, or assessments) has been a good one.

The most common frustration students have in their evaluations is with the reading assignments. Difficulty with philosophy reading has been a persistent challenge for my students since I began teaching at the university level in 2007. Until a few terms into my time at Rivier, I accepted this as the necessary fate for any philosophy professor who is committed to (1) the inclusion of primary source materials, and (2) meeting the accreditation requirement of 2 hours of homework for every hour of class time. My response to student complaints cannot be to reduce that out of class work time, since it would compromise the integrity of the credits awarded. But I also know that there is always more I can do to (1) prepare my students for the kind of reading that must be a necessary component of any philosophy class and (2) assist them with it by means of carefully selecting texts and excerpts, accompanying them with helpful resources, and following up with clarifying class lectures and discussions. The desired outcome here is for students to be able to learn from, see the relevance of, and possibly even come to love the great books of the luminaries of the past. This is a big part of the reason why I chose to use so much of my pandemic isolation in 2020 to write my textbook, as opposed to working on more rigorous and prestigious scholarly projects. Since Spring 2021, in *Theories of Ethics*, about half of the reading is from my textbook and the rest is directly from primary sources. The textbook chapters are short (about 15 pages on average; designed for 1-3 hours of reading time) and are intended to employ various tools (mainstream movies and TV shows, definitions of key terms, annotations, explanations from me, and questions for consideration) to help students successfully comprehend excerpts from primary sources. After each chapter, I have the students read longer selections of the primary sources begun in the textbook that I make available to them freely through Canvas. The idea here is to use the textbook as a scaffold for comprehending difficult primary source readings. The textbook is sort of like training wheels, which only come off periodically, as opposed to the duration of the course as was the case in my pre-2021 courses. In *Contemporary Moral Issues*, all of the reading is from the textbook, and even though there are significant primary source excerpts in each chapter, there are relatively few student complaints about the course reading in comparison to *Theories of Ethics*. So, the most significant source of their difficulties in *Theories* must be the primary source readings outside of the textbook (with the "training wheels off"). In order to duplicate the success of CMI then, I'll eventually need to include all of the primary source reading I'd like them to do for *Theories* in the textbook, as a second edition.

When teaching honors-caliber students, I prefer to scaffold less and spend more time on the primary sources. I therefore would probably not use my textbook if I taught such students in the future.

College students face obstacles to learning that we have not seen before, including technological tools that can enrich their lives in many ways, but that also have an unprecedented ability to distract. Additionally, the rising costs of higher education proportionately fuel a desire to instrumentalize one's learning for the sake of specific career-related skills. Finally, there is the not-new obstacle of living in a society, which, at least in its mainstream, does not value rigorous, ordered, and sustained thought. Our obstacles as educators therefore are numerous and significant, requiring not only our

individual innovative efforts to motivate our students' liberal arts education, but also collaborative efforts, among not only faculty but all stakeholders, to face these challenges with great hope for success.

I am therefore proud to report the above innovations, as well as the collaborative work I have done, including that with my First Year Experience Teaching Fellows at CUA, when we linked our courses. I gave a presentation on our efforts to my colleagues at CUA, and received a grant from BSU to develop that presentation into a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) essay, which was ultimately published.

Although I keep the learning outcomes for my courses at the forefront of my mind, I do not truly know the long-term impact of my efforts. However, I've been privileged with glimpses of students' intellectual transformations along the way that have substantially reaffirmed my vocation to teach others for their own benefit and the good of our society. One such example is when students' writing quality improves after meeting with me about how to best revise thoroughly. Other examples include the times when students in a class discussion become enflamed with enthusiasm for a debate or topic to which I introduced them. Finally, when students inform me that my class makes them think intensely, I see how my efforts are transforming their thinking. I believe that teaching students philosophy holds amazing potential for their intellectual formation. I believe in making the most of any opportunity to help college students become good thinkers through philosophy, and hope that the philosophical student formation work I have begun will continue and improve.

My efforts related to inclusion also involve my approach to one-on-one interactions with students. As a first-generation college student who is also the first in my extended family to earn an advanced degree, and whose father is a convicted felon, I am positioned well to empathize with and relate to those from underrepresented populations in higher education and our field, including not only students, but faculty and staff. I was born and raised in a diverse, working class area of the Bronx, NYC, attended high school in Manhattan, lived in Germany for a month, and lived in Dublin, Ireland for an academic year. These foundational experiences broadened my worldview and continue to contribute to my ability to effectively engage students across a variety of populations and institutions. I've taught in 5 states, at 2 state universities, a community college, and 5 Catholic institutions. In my interactions with students and colleagues from underrepresented populations, I try my best to avoid unconscious bias and to ensure that they are (and feel) just as heard, noticed, and valued as any other student or colleague. When I learn from a student that they are first-gen like I am, I share a bit of my own background and let them know that there are others like them who have successfully graduated from college, and even graduate school, despite not having the benefits that go along with coming from a college-educated family, like generational wisdom. I also realize the importance of being aware of the unique experiences of each individual, especially those who have faced adversity that is beyond what I can relate to through my own experiences. When interacting with a student who has such a background, I listen, empathize, and let them know that I and others on campus are ready and willing to be a part of their support network.

The readings I select and the figures from the past on whom I choose to focus in my courses are also part of my inclusion efforts. The content of the courses I've developed is geographically, culturally, and chronologically diverse, with many countries, regions, cultures, and time periods represented. However, the vast majority of my training, and most of the philosophical content in my

courses, is nonetheless oriented around the Western canon and tradition. The latter was largely formed and shaped by men, many of whom were white, and many of whom made personal decisions that are clearly immoral in light of recent developments in ethics, especially regarding rights and structural/systematic oppression. Indeed it is arguable that elements of that tradition contributed to the systematic oppression of women and people of color (henceforth POC).

Simply cancelling any aspect of the Western canon that we deem responsible in any way for oppression, or any author whose views, writings, or personal decisions exhibit unacceptable and perhaps inexcusable bias, is highly inadvisable. Doing so would definitely eliminate Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Heidegger for a variety of reasons. Plato might be cancelled too, and possibly any thought associated with the Catholic Church, which has had a male-dominated hierarchy for nearly two millennia and which persecuted non-Christians, innovative thinkers, members of the LGBTQIA community, and others at various times in its history. The result of such censorship and banishment would be a highly incomplete understanding of the multi-millennium intellectual conversation that has formed much of the modern world, for good or bad. Such ignorance is unacceptable for those who wish to receive a truly liberal education and who want to be thoughtful citizens in modern democracies. To completely ignore the sins of the Western tradition would result in another kind of unacceptable ignorance.

Therefore, the best approach in my estimation involves consideration of the major thinkers, schools, and movements in the Western tradition, done thoughtfully and consciously. Though Aristotle's writing about friendship for instance may largely strike us as highly thought-provoking, insightful, and beneficial, we can reap its benefits while acknowledging that it might be improved by including the perspectives of those Aristotle either excluded (LGBTQIA, non-Greeks) or was biased against (women for example). We can acknowledge the faults of the source while still seeking the truth it conveys. Even the latter we accept critically and with reasonable skepticism and tentativeness.

But what about the fact that women and many POC are not represented as "major" influencers because of historically perpetuated, centuries-long oppression? Surely there's excellent work from such thinkers that's been ignored or overlooked. Though much of the potential contribution from such thinkers has simply been prevented before it happened, or lost, certainly there's something to be uncovered and/or elevated that's not received just attention. There are many scholars working diligently on this and we should be attentive to what they produce. While doing so, we should make a concerted effort to notice and elevate contributions by those who have suffered from historical injustice. Jewish thinkers like Spinoza and Levinas who faced harsh persecution come to mind, and female philosophers like Hannah Arendt (who was also a Jewish refugee), Judith Thomson, and Philippa Foot. I'm happy to say that all of the above are well represented in my philosophy courses. I am also interested in learning more about, and possibly teaching, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Cavendish, and Mary Midgley.

Nonetheless, gaps persist in my knowledge and course offerings, not due to any lack of interest. Native American and feminist thought is underrepresented in my philosophy courses. I hope to incorporate some of both into my new environmental ethics course at Rivier. I plan to expand my knowledge and treatment of climate justice in the new environmental ethics course as well.