

Title:

Engaging Introductory Philosophy Students Through Overarching Question Assignments

Description:**Audience:**

Teachers of introductory philosophy courses; those who teach “human nature” courses might find the workshop of particular interest.

The problem:

As a mostly problem-oriented philosopher designing a philosophy of human nature course, I was frustrated with the historical organization of most available textbooks because it was hard to get students to think about a problem that a particular author was addressing. In my experience, I've been unable to generate a lot of interest in the question of what human nature is according to philosopher X, just for its own sake. I got comments about not seeing the point of the material. So I was seeking a way to organize the course around problems that the students could find interesting and engaging in their own right, rather than start from historical sources and work toward their motivations. I was also dissatisfied with my own sense of the cohesiveness and direction of the course, so I needed a way to clarify and solidify my reasons for choosing the particular selections I did.

Many introductory survey courses are already organized around questions or problems such as free will, skepticism, the existence of God, etc. But (in my experience) students often come to a course expecting to be asked to master a body of knowledge—to learn what philosophers X, Y and Z had to say. They expect to learn *about* philosophy, and not necessarily to *do* philosophy. The motivating hope of the assignment that is the topic of this workshop is that adding an element of doing philosophy helps to engage students (and in part to attract majors).

The solution:

As I revised my syllabi, I decided to try centering each unit over not just a loose theme, but an overarching question to which each reading could be seen as some (perhaps partial) answer. Here are two of the six I developed for my human nature course: (1) What does the fact that we're animals with DNA suggest about what humans are like and what our purposes in life are? What are the advantages and limitations of the scientific point of view of human nature? (2) For much of Western philosophical history, reason has been idolized as humans' best quality and our defining characteristic; will, desire, and emotion were despised as unruly and out of control. In what ways are we characterized by our intellect and reasoning abilities? How do other mental functions like will and emotion contribute to our understanding of what it is to be human?

Just developing such questions helped me, but I knew it wouldn't be enough to make the relevance of each reading salient to the students. So I asked the students to jump in and write a brief answer to the question from their own experience to start off the unit, which counted as a daily homework assignment. Then each unit would be capped by a revised and expanded essay written “in dialogue with” the authors we read for the unit. In the latest iteration, I also took about ten minutes of class at the end of a unit and asked students to

reflect on how they thought their thinking about the question had developed since their first draft.

This assignment has the advantages that, if designed well by the professor and done well by the student, it gives the students a sense of engagement with the larger conversation about things that matter—an important purpose of liberal arts education. It makes the architecture of the course and the purpose of each unit clear to them. It gives them a sense of ownership of the material because it begins with their own thinking. It requires a certain amount of metacognition, which helps them to notice what they've learned. It requires mastery of texts. And it provides practice with things like charitable reading, articulating others' positions, evaluating and criticizing arguments, and articulating their own ideas.

What worked and what didn't:

The strategy got considerable interest and approval from my colleagues, but the first version of it was mostly a failure. Most students' revised essays were essentially their first one with a few quotes and references to texts thrown in. So I needed to beef up the details of the assignment and provide a more detailed rubric for how I would grade the second essay in order to ensure that the engagement and dialogue I was after would be there.

In subsequent iterations, I also realized that the assignment would go better if the students not only give an answer to the question, but also spend time explaining the question, its motivations, and its importance. Next time, the assignment will probably have three parts. In the first part, the students should present a philosophical problem that gives rise to the overarching question. Then they should explain the ways different thinkers have approached the problem. Finally, they should give their own take on the problem, supported by reasons. These instructions won't change the nature or purpose of the assignment dramatically, but I think it makes the scaffolding of the assignment stronger.

What participants will do:

- After a brief introduction, participants will take a few minutes to answer an example of an overarching question for themselves.
- The presenter will explain the overarching question syllabus design and student assignment, its motivations, and its strengths and weaknesses.
- We will discuss how a course might build a unit on the example overarching question, and how a good revised answer might look.
- Depending on interest, participants will:
 - generate lists of potential overarching questions.
 - discuss ways to improve the strategy.

Session goals:

- Share an example of a teaching strategy and assignment for intro-level courses.
- Get feedback on the assignment structure in hopes of improving it further.

Some references:

- John T. Bruer, *Schools for Thought: A Science for Learning in the Classroom* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994)

- Mathew Lipman et al., *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Temple University Press, 1980).
- Robert Fisher, *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom*, 3rd. ed. (Continuum, 2008)
- Sadhana Puntambekar, and Roland Hübscher, “Tools for Scaffolding Students in a Complex Learning Environment: What Have We Gained and What Have We Missed?,” *Educational Psychologist* 40:1 (2004): 1–12.
- John Rudisill, “The Transition from Studying Philosophy to Doing Philosophy,” *Teaching Philosophy*, 34:3 (2011): 241-271.
- Brian J. Reiser, “Scaffolding Complex Learning: The Mechanisms of Structuring and Problematizing Student Work,” *The Journal of The Learning Sciences* 13:3 (2004):273–304.

Handouts:

assignment description

sample syllabus

Equipment:

projector for Power Point slides

poster paper and markers