

Rehabilitating the Narrative Character of Classrooms

In Chapter 2 of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Paulo Freire roundly criticizes what he refers to as the “narration sickness” of education. This sickness reveals itself through the relationship of teacher and student in which the teacher’s control of the content and presentation of the material presumes and promotes the objectification of students as patients in the educational process, perpetuating a “banking model” of education. He suggests that a liberatory pedagogy must do away with narrativity and instead embrace a problem-posing framework. And yet, narratives remain a powerful tool in the philosophy instructor’s toolbox, especially for producing coherent course design and thematically consistent reading lists that introduce students to and provide avenues for well-grounded engagement with increasingly dense bodies of literature. Is it always the case that class narratives diminish student agency? Can course narratives be used productively to encourage student exploration and the development of a student’s “critical consciousness”? How so?

In this presentation, I offer my introduction to philosophy course as a case study for examining these questions. The survey course examines the history of philosophy through the lens of philosophy of education.

Readings include:

- Plato’s *Meno & Republic* (selections from Books VI & VII)
- Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections from Books I & II) & *Metaphysics* (selections from Books I & II)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (excerpts)
- Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Ch. 12
- Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, Ch. 8
- W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Ch. 13
- Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Ch. 3
- Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chs. 1 & 2
- Louis Althusser’s *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (excerpts)
- bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*

To be more precise, I seek to demonstrate that a historical narrative can prompt co-investigation of pervasive problems in epistemology (e.g. the distinction of practical & theoretical knowledge), metaphysics (e.g. “what are the objects of knowledge?”), ethics (e.g. “What does a person need to know to be moral?”), and social & political philosophy (e.g. “Who is education for? What is the state’s role in providing education?”), while at the same time encouraging students to develop personal narratives about the value and function of education in their own lives. To do so, I will focus on the opportunity I had in summer ‘22 to work with students at a women’s long-term incarceration facility located in north Georgia.

The constraints of teaching and learning in such a tightly policed environment were numerous: classes were scheduled to meet once a week for 3 hours, but due to facility protocols, rarely met for more than 2 hours; issues with the facility’s general operation meant that several students each week were unable to attend class; additionally, students had no access to research materials beyond the readings provided and were forced to complete readings and assignments in the spare time that they are afforded each evening. In order to address these issues, I chose to center classroom discussion in each meeting, generally by starting with small-group discussions around a prompt that served to scaffold our examination of the material. Readings and assignments were modified to be feasible given these constraints, and I focused on giving consistent feedback that

encouraged and challenged each student to engage in critical analysis of the text rather than static grades. The flow of the class readings (presented in a “point-counterpoint” manner) allowed me to introduce philosophical complications (or *aporiae*) into these classroom discussions with the purpose of motivating the next author’s goals, culminating in some excellent student presentations on Paulo Freire’s core concepts.

Using examples of student work, classroom activities, writing prompts (including, and qualitative student evaluations, I suggest that *aporetic* narrativity has a powerful role to play in the implementation of a “problem-posing education.” Audience members will be asked to participate in the creation of a word cloud that represents their ideas regarding the value of education. We will use that as a point of comparison with student’s final essays in answer to the prompt: “What is the value and purpose of an education, and what are your educational goals moving forward?”