

# Creative Teaching

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Here I seek to define creative teaching in Philosophy. I argue that creative teaching must be distinguished from efforts that are merely novel, offering no gains in student learning or that offer faculty no gain as alternatives to standard methods. I discuss efficiency and productivity in teaching Philosophy and our ability to adopt creative methods.

Creative Teaching is teaching that warrants pride, approbation, and commendation. But not all innovative teaching efforts are creative and these do not warrant such pride, approbation, and commendation. Unless they satisfy appropriate criteria they may be merely innovative efforts, that is, such efforts may be of unknown or dubious value, because contrary to standard, accepted practices, they are deviant at best, and worse, may be harmful.

Beyond being novel, creative teaching is valuable. And we must ask, of what value? Of what nature or kind is this value? And valuable for whom? Whose interests does it serve? In its simplest form:

*Creative teaching in philosophy is innovative effort that results in student learning in philosophy equal to or greater than what standard methods achieve.*

The key element here is of course student learning. Without knowledge, or reasonable belief, that an innovative effort actually produces resultant learning equal to or beyond what standard methods produce, we have no way to judge that such efforts are not simply novel, that is not simply deviant. And such deviance, no matter how attractive it may seem to the student, to the instructor, or to anyone else, including mentors, peers, or deans, may be nugatory, resulting in less, or perverse learning, and may be an obstacle to student understanding. (It may be ugly teaching.) And so we see that adequate measures of student learning, progress, and development in philosophy are essential to judge any innovative efforts in teaching philosophy as creative.

And of course, the creation of these measures, when innovative, are themselves instances of creative teaching in philosophy. For example, they could be student assignments that contribute directly to student learning, as in challenging students to apply newly taught skills to new problems or issues. Or they may be merely effective means to gauge learning without influencing the individual student. Such measures might be student evaluations of teaching, or efforts to check to see what subsequent courses students enrol for, and so on.

When we consider which students, that is, whose learning is to be equalled or enhanced by innovative methods, we should recognise that it can be any student.

For example, Socrates' efforts, which seem to be of great success in teaching Plato and others, failed miserably it seems with Alcibiades. We might suppose that this shows Alcibiades was unfit for philosophy, impervious to its charms, and to a love of wisdom. But why suppose that? Why not just the opposite, that if Socrates had been a more experienced teacher of philosophy, if he had more than one arrow in his quiver, he might well have been more successful with Alcibiades than he was. And we might even suppose that maybe Alcibiades, shown another path to the love of wisdom, would not have come to so despise Socrates, and to betray Athens as he did.

What worked with other students failed with Alcibiades. But let us suppose that had Socrates done something different in the case of Alcibiades; Alcibiades might have come to be a lover of wisdom. Let us suppose that there might have been something, some one single thing, which would have succeeded with Alcibiades, where nothing else had or could succeed. I presume he never read *Theaetetus*, which has surely attracted lots of students to philosophy where Socrates own "torpedo fish" methods might not. And so *Republic* – but on my supposition, only *Republic* – could have been the key for Alcibiades. But now, take this one step further, suppose Plato recognised what a unique problem Alcibiades presented to the philosophy instructor. Suppose he saw that none of his other dialogues would succeed with Alcibiades. And so Plato, talented teacher that he was, wrote a new dialogue, one especially suited to help Alcibiades find a love of wisdom; or if this anachronous dialogue is troubling, suppose Socrates himself hit on a method uniquely suited to Alcibiades, but useful with no one else – in fact, one which would produce with anyone else the same unfortunate result that Socrates' usual method produced with Alcibiades, that is, a disdain for both the teacher and for philosophy.

Surely, for Socrates to find the unique method useful for Alcibiades and no one else, would be a teaching triumph. And similarly for any other philosophy teacher dealing perhaps with such a unique student. So, while we might hope that an instance of creative teaching will become a piece of the standard repertoire of philosophy instructors, useful with all students, or at least some recognisable segment of them, we must acknowledge that the value we seek in creative teaching may be unique to a single student, even in a single instant, and a great teaching achievement for all that. Such an achievement again deserves pride, approbation, and commendation, but of course, by supposition, such a unique method cannot be "recommended" for use by others, with others.

We must save “recommendation” for those methods that can be shown to be more widely useful, contenders to be elements of the standard repertoire of philosophy educators, but with guidelines or caveats as to when such methods are “indicated,” and prescribable, and when not.

Another element of the definition above is that creative teaching in philosophy is innovative, it is novel. It may be novel to a whole profession, completely original *in toto* or in aspects unimagined before. Or it may be imported to the profession, an idea used elsewhere and adapted to philosophy instruction. But we must acknowledge that novelty may be novelty specific to a particular instructor, coming up with ideas new to them but which others may already be using. And again, this creativity, for this instructor, may be deserving of pride, approbation, and commendation, especially if the instructor is a novice in whom we wish to engender creative teaching aims and habits. For just as students are deserving of pride, approbation, and commendation for ideas new to them at stages appropriate to their development, it is the same for philosophy teachers as well. And as good teaching requires that students receive appropriate acknowledgment of such creative efforts, so too, good supervision of teaching development requires the same.

But how will we know if any novel effort is novel only to that individual, or if it may be an idea that is novel and immensely valuable to the whole profession – if we only knew about it? This points up the absolute necessity for adequate processes and forums and institutions within the profession to motivate, identify, evaluate, refine, and promulgate innovative methods. We have all of these to help in areas of philosophical research, and almost nothing as regards creative teaching in philosophy. And of course, our teaching as individuals and as a profession suffers for it, in both our achievement for student learning, and our joy and pride in teaching philosophy.

### **More Efficient, More Productive Teaching**

The above definition of creative teaching, that is, innovation promoting equal or better student learning, may omit an important aspect of teaching. What of methods that, while preserving student learning, can enable an instructor to do so more readily or more efficiently, with less effort, in less time, at less cost, with fewer resources, or in some other way? And what of innovations that, again while preserving student learning, can enable an instructor to teach more students. What of ideas that allow the individual instructor, or a department, or an institution, or the profession to teach more efficiently or productively, while preserving student learning?

By speaking of productivity for institutions I may have raised some qualms among people who worry that they may be already suffering from concerns for "productivity." And surely, professor satisfaction must also be a part of the teaching equation, and we will need to address it. But it also seems unobjectionable, even responsible, that we should acknowledge the value of ideas or methods that allow an individual instructor to achieve the same result with less work, or more efficiently – or for that matter, would allow the student to achieve the same learning with less work, or more efficiently. If Method A can teach propositional logic in two weeks, why would we not prefer it to Method B that takes two months, *ceteris paribus*? Clearly, efficiency, is/should be, a valued aspect of creative teaching, and again deserves recognition, pride, approbation, and commendation.

Productivity may be more difficult for us to appreciate. Should we consider a method that allows Wilson to teach 100 students or 1000 students in a single class, without loss of student learning, compared to classes of 20 students, to be commendable, deserving his pride, our approbation? I won't explore this issue further, but it profoundly requires our attention, including especially the various *ceteris paribus* clauses operative here. For example, can philosophy, or various aspects of philosophy, be taught and learned in such classrooms? That people have tried to do this is no reason to suppose it can be done. And anyone's resistance to such methods is no reason to think it cannot be done, and be done without loss of student learning.

Again, let me focus on the idea that creative teaching need not advance student learning, only equal it. Greater efficiency or productivity, as above, could be one reason for pride, approbation, and commendation of innovative methods that only preserve, without advancing, student learning. But another reason would be the contribution to the profession, to the standard repertoire, of an alternative method for philosophers to achieve acceptable results. For the value of having, of knowing, alternative methods of achieving the same results is considerable; it is not mere redundancy. There may be individual instructors, or students, or situations for which one or another of these methods, which on the average are equal, is clearly preferred, resulting in greater instructor or student achievement.

This attention to what has been called teaching and learning styles, might suggest that philosophy teachers should find methods suitable to their style, or a requirement that they determine their students' learning styles, or even an individual student's learning style, and stick to what works for their students or for a student. I believe there is much wisdom in attending to notions of teaching and learning style, but I also know that learning and teaching styles can change. Often we just are trying to help students who seem wedded to one style develop new habits and new styles. Some of our students have no skills at careful written expositions of reading materials, but may be very perceptive for all that, and incisive in critiquing orally the

materials in class. Our students come to us in part for the development of new, useful, styles, not merely for us to indulge the habits they've acquired already. And I say that even of the student habits and styles that as philosophers we might be most tempted to indulge. And I don't intend this to be a rationale for ignoring the habits and proclivities, or styles, which students bring to class, for if we are to teach students new habits, new ideas, and so on, it requires us to begin where they are at. The *Symposium* is certainly right about that.

Likewise, instructor styles are not fixed. We can all change. We have all changed. But whether those changes are, or will be facilitative of student learning, is an open question. Mostly we have worked to model ourselves on what we thought others we admired were doing, or on what we think our peers and students might or should admire. None of us were born philosophy teachers of any style; we all worked, consciously or not, to acquire the styles and skills we have. But often all this may be no real guide to teaching excellence. It may be only a guide to what we, our peers, or our students like.

Brilliant lectures and artful use of Socratic methods will earn much peer praise, but brilliant lectures are no guide to student learning, and Socratic methods may actually alienate students, or delight others for the wrong reasons.

But suppose these star faculty could be made aware of their failures here, hidden behind edifying lectures? And their colleagues, and students too, could recognize that these great teachers were not that great teachers at all? Could these instructors change? Could they become adept in the way prescribed? Sure. I don't doubt it for a moment. They have won pride and prizes for their current methods, and surely they are comfortable with them. But, if these faculty can excel at dealing with issues and problems in history, they can similarly deal with issues and problems in the teaching of history. They may find pride and prizes there. They need only the motivation to do so. If such motivation cannot be found in reflective regard for their own teaching, they can likely find it in the eyes and judgments of graduate students, their colleagues, and the AHA, to the extent that all these recognise the inadequacies of these methods, and agitate for better. And if there are faculty who are resistant – I can't imagine, unable – to learn better ways, then let them die, as Thomas Kuhn might say, with the knowledge that they will be the last of their kind. The academy, and our professtion will have moved on.