

Teaching Teaching Philosophy

MICHAEL MARTIN

Boston University

Contemporary philosophy has changed remarkably in the last decade. The new surge of interest among analytic philosophers in topics such as death, abortion, and war is one indication of the change. Another indication is the interest of philosophers in the study of the teaching of philosophy. Various symposia on the teaching of philosophy, the new journal *Teaching Philosophy*, conferences on the teaching of philosophy, an institute for teaching philosophy to children are some evidence of this interest, an interest that certainly seemed to be lacking in the philosophical community a decade ago.

In contrast to the new surge of interest in the teaching of philosophy in the philosophical community generally, an interest in the teaching of philosophy is not new at Boston University at least if one judges interest in terms of courses offered, for there has been a graduate seminar offered in the teaching of philosophy since at least the 1940's. Its long history indicates a genuine commitment to the education of philosophy teachers at Boston University and a sense of responsibility to those various schools—usually small liberal arts schools—around the country in which Boston University philosophy Ph.D.'s were and are continuing to be placed.

PH 851 Teaching of Philosophy has been taught throughout the years by many different people. Although there has been wide variance in the seminar each time it has been given this is not unusual for a graduate seminar at Boston University or, as far as I can tell, at other universities. The wide variance, I believe, reflects the different interests and philosophical perspectives of the faculty as well as the non-canonical nature of the material in the field. Three recent examples should give some idea of the diversity.

Marx Wartofsky related how he taught the seminar in a symposium on the teaching of philosophy at the 1973 Eastern Division APA meeting. One of the major goals was to develop students' awareness of the various historical forms of the teaching of philosophy (from the Agora of Athens to 20th century Brooklyn College). This historical awareness, Wartofsky argued, would help sharpen students' awareness of what they were doing when they taught philosophy. As part of this sharpening process the role and problems of the philosophical profession were considered.

Jane Martin's seminar was non-historical. General problems in philosophy of education posed by essays in her book *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum*, were considered. These were then related via student papers and class discussions to specific problems in the teaching of philosophy. For example, the logic of justifying curriculum decisions, a topic covered in her book, was considered in relation to justifying philosophy curriculum decisions.

Donald Dunbar's seminar was in sharp contrast to both Marx Wartofsky's and Jane Martin's. The seminar as a whole taught an experimental introductory course in philosophy to B.U. undergraduates. This involved the seminar in the choice of text books, in planning the course, in evaluating the teaching performance of the members of the seminar and ultimately in the writing of a group report about various aspects of the teaching of philosophy.

Whether the seminar has had an effect on the rest of the members of the Department is hard to assess. Relatively few members of the Department have taught the seminar or have shown interest in doing so, although there has been wide agreement that the seminar is very important to graduate student education. No doubt the situation could be improved and more faculty interest could be generated. A colloquium on the teaching of philosophy could be held and the seminar might invite various members of the faculty to discuss their ideas on teaching.

This year (1974-75) I taught the seminar and in this paper I will explain my rationale for the seminar, the material covered, the procedure used, and my evaluation of the seminar.

The purpose of the seminar, as I conceived it, was to introduce graduate students to some of the problems in teaching philosophy and to get them to think critically and creatively about them. By "problems" I do not mean merely philosophical problems about the teaching of philosophy although there are many of these. Various kinds of problems would be discussed: ethical, pedagogical, and professional.

This seemed a worthwhile and important goal, one that is usually neglected in graduate education in philosophy. Although most graduate students in philosophy want to teach philosophy, they are given little opportunity to think about problems connected with the teaching of philosophy.

Basically the methods used to try to achieve these goals were these: the seminar read and critically discussed literature on general problems of higher education and of the teaching of philosophy in liberal arts colleges and elsewhere. The students were given assignments that encouraged critical thought on and creative application of this literature.

In the first several weeks two books by philosophers on general problems in higher education were read: Steven Cahn's *The Eclipse of Excellence* and Robert Paul Wolff's *The Ideal of a University*. The books made an interesting contrast and opened up many problems. Cahn's book provided a traditional defense of academic standards as well as practices such as grading and exams;

it also provided an ideal model of the university embodying this traditional view. Wolff's book provided a radical critique of grading and exams in liberal arts colleges and a very different model of what the university should be. The assignment for this part of the course was to write a five page paper on the questions: (1) Should there be grades in a liberal arts college? If so, on what basis? or (2) Should liberal arts courses be made relevant? If so, how?

In the next part of the seminar two papers dealing with general problems of teaching philosophy in a liberal arts college were read: G.L. Field's "The Teaching of Philosophy," printed in *Philosophical Essays in Curriculum*, eds. Robert Guttchen and Bertram Bandman, and Michael Goldman's "Institutional Obstacles to the Teaching of Philosophy" which is to appear in *Teaching Philosophy Today: Criticism and Response*, eds. Terrell Ward Bynum and Sidney Reisberg. The assignment was to design a curriculum employing some of Field's ideas or a modification thereof or to write a five page paper critically considering the obstacles to teaching philosophy detailed by Goldman. The Field assignment produced two very interesting papers, one developing a curriculum in philosophy of religion and another a curriculum in aesthetics.

The next part of the seminar considered various methods of teaching philosophy. On the lecture method we read J. McLeish's *The Lecture Method*; on instrumental design methods we read David West's "A New Medium for Teaching Philosophy", *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 3, 1972; on the Socratic method we read Gary Iseminger's "On Reading and Doing Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 3, 1972, and R. Sherman's "Is it Possible to Teach Socratically?", *Soundings*, 1970; on motivational techniques we read Virginia Black's "Motivational Teaching in College Classroom", *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 4, 1973; on the interview (or Keller) method we read Owen Flanagan's "Philosophy Seminar and the Interview Method," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 5, 1974, and George Berry's "The Keller Method in an Introductory Philosophy Course: A Preliminary Report", *Personalized System of Instruction*, ed. J. Gilmour Sherman.

Owen Flanagan and George Berry, the authors of the two papers on the interview method, and Ilona Webb, who introduced the interview method at Boston University, visited the seminar. The result was a lively exchange between proponents of the method and some of the more skeptical members of the seminar.

In addition to the teaching methods mentioned above several other teaching techniques came up in discussion: the use of movies and/or literature as a teaching device; the place that field trips might have, e.g., attending religious ceremonies in philosophy of religion courses; the use of video tapes of philosophical discussions, e.g., those available at the Center for Philosophic Exchange at SUNY, Brockport; the use of conference phone hook-ups to talk to well-known philosophers; the use of newspapers to teach analysis of arguments, e.g., in editorials, or to teach the analysis of implicit value commitments, e.g., in sports pages or comicstrips.

The assignment for this part of the seminar was to write a five page paper

on either a non-lecture method of teaching philosophy that students in the seminar had actually used or a new way of teaching philosophy that they believed would be effective. Some very interesting ideas were produced by this assignment, ideas ranging from (literally) teaching philosophy in the dark to teaching philosophy in a bar (the bar room method).

In the last part of the seminar we considered problems of teaching philosophy outside the university or college setting. The rationale for doing this was as follows: First, it is possible that teaching philosophy in high schools and grade schools will be more wide spread in the future than it is now. Given the college job market students should be prepared to take advantage of this possibility. Indeed, one of our graduate students has recently obtained a full-time job teaching philosophy at Andover Academy—something that would have been inconceivable ten years ago. Secondly, some of the techniques used in teaching philosophy to children might be used in teaching college students. Thirdly, although the course was meant to help philosophy graduate students who will teach professionally this was not the entire rationale for the course. The purpose of the seminar was, as I indicated above, to introduce students to some of the problems in teaching philosophy—not necessarily teaching philosophy professionally. Philosophy graduate students may well be parents and the philosophical training of children will be their concern.

First, we considered teaching philosophy to children. We read Gareth Matthews's "Philosophy and Children's Literature" and Matthew Lipman's "Philosophy for Children" (as well as his book *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*) and Clyde Evans, of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, visited the seminar. Clyde Evans has been deeply involved in teaching philosophy to children and his experience in and approach to such teaching was illuminating and helpful. Secondly, we considered problems involved in teaching high school philosophy and read Hugo W. Thompson's *High School Philosophy*.

As a final assignment seminar students could teach some philosophical idea to a child and write a five page report, design a high school philosophy course which was an improvement over the curriculum suggested in *High School Philosophy*, or write a letter to Matthew Lipman making suggestions for the improvement of his book.

The seminar as a whole was conducted by students taking turns reporting on sections of the books or articles. They usually gave an exposition of the major theses and raised critical questions. After setting the seminar up and making assignments I really had little to do. It pretty much ran itself. The students (William Burkert, Kenneth Fye, Patrick Grim and James Walker) were so competent and mature they could always be counted on to present the material fairly and raise the right sorts of questions about it.

How successful the seminar was in achieving the goals I set for it is another question. The students were certainly introduced to various problems connected with higher education and teaching philosophy. Furthermore, judging from their papers and comments, they thought critically about these

problems. Their creativity concerning teaching philosophy was harder to assess but interesting curriculum ideas were brought up in seminar meetings and in their papers. How much their actual teaching practice will be changed by the seminar is difficult, if not impossible to say at this time. It might be useful in a few years to ask students who took the seminar to evaluate the impact the seminar had on their teaching.

The question arises, however, whether there is a reliable and systematic way of evaluating the impact of this type of seminar. One suggestion is to compare students who have taken the seminar with ones who have not in terms of criteria usually associated with good teaching, e.g., reputation of being a good teacher among colleagues, student evaluation reports, teaching awards. The methodological problem with this suggestion is the difficulty of getting comparable groups. Since the course is now voluntary at Boston University, students who take the seminar are not a representative sample; they are very likely to be more interested and concerned about teaching than the average student.

Moreover, in the past no comparison among Boston University students was possible since the seminar was required. Comparison with the teaching performance may be attributed to other factors, e.g., differences in the make-offer such a seminar with the teaching performance of Boston University students would also be difficult to evaluate. Any difference between Boston University students and non-Boston University students in terms of teaching performance may be attributed to other factors, e.g., differences in the make-up of in-coming graduate students, differences in faculty.

Still, there may well be graduate philosophy departments that are equivalent enough to Boston University's department in terms of, e.g., in-coming students, faculty, to make a significant comparison.

I personally learned a great deal from the seminar. Whether it made me a better teacher of philosophy I do not know, but there is no doubt that it made me more aware of the issues, problems, and methods involved in teaching philosophy. I certainly would like to give the seminar again.

At the end of the seminar I asked for suggestions for improving the seminar when or if I give it again. Some of the suggestions were:

- (1) More guests should be invited to the seminar.
- (2) A symposium on the teaching of philosophy should be sponsored in which faculty members and students participate.
- (3) Problems connected with teaching students to write clear and coherent papers should be discussed.
- (4) Some reading should be replaced, e.g., McLeich's book on the lecture method was highly criticized for being tedious and unhelpful.

I agree with most of the suggestions, although given the limits of time it would be difficult to know what to cut in order to incorporate these suggestions into the course. There was another obvious limitation to the seminar. Although general problems of education were considered in the first part of the course, e.g., grading, relevance, and some empirical studies connected with education were discussed, e.g., McLeich's review of studies of the lecture

method, no attempt was made to relate any work done in the School of Education to the teaching of philosophy. This was due to my limited knowledge as well as to problems of time.

All in all my experience (and apparently the Department's experience) with PH 851 has been a favorable one. Whether all large graduate philosophy departments should have such a course is a question which I will not attempt to answer. Still another question is when such a course should be compulsory or voluntary. Boston University has tried both ways. My feeling from talking to students who have been forced into taking PH 851 in past years and from teaching PH 851 now that it is voluntary, is that a course in the teaching of philosophy should be voluntary. Although fewer graduate students may take the course if it is voluntary, one can be fairly well assured that graduate students who do take the course are genuinely interested in teaching. My experience has been that compulsory courses—especially among graduate students—create an attitude of resentment that tends to inhibit the learning process.

The Journal of Philosophy

Subscriptions at \$10.00/year; \$7.00 to students
\$16.00/year to libraries

Complete volumes and all separate issues available back to Jan. 7, 1904 (volume I, number 1). Prices as follows:

BEFORE 1963 (vols. I–LX)

Single issues: \$1.50; double, \$3.00. Volumes, \$30.00 each.

1964 to 1973 (vols. LXI–LXX)

Single issues, \$1.00; double, \$2.00. Volumes, \$20.00 each.

1974 AND LATER (vols. LXXI on)

Single issues, 60¢; double, \$1.20. Volumes, \$16.00 each.

ALSO AVAILABLE

Cumulative Fifty-year Index, 1904–1953; articles classified by subject and author; 452 p.; cloth, \$12.00. Ten-year Supplement, 1954–1963: 98 p.; \$3.00 cloth, \$2.00 paperbound.

720 PHILOSOPHY HALL, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NYC 10027