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When Conversation Goes Wrong: Managing Student Errors

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Introduction

In traditional philosophy lectures, students typically assume that the instructor believes what they tell the class. Students may even safely assume that many of their lecturer's claims are true—for example, that Plato believed in the theory of forms or that Thomson believes that a right to life does not entail a right to use someone else's body. Still, many claims that we assert in class are open to discussion. We often frame them as such: while Descartes argues that there are minds and bodies, Hobbes argues that there are only bodies and we are trying to figure out who is right.

Many philosophy teachers now reject traditional classroom structures. Our reasons may be, roughly, forward-looking or backward-looking. We might use active learning in light of research that shows that students learn better what they do than what they hear or read.¹ We might seek greater student empowerment and voice, allowing students to determine the direction of conversation or class content.²

Whatever our motivations—and we might be motivated by both kinds of considerations—a student in a non-traditional class is likely to hear many claims, made by their peers, that are neither believed by their instructor nor

true. They may be working in small groups, out of earshot. They may be engaged in a seminar conversation in which the instructor allows students to explore without interference. They may be working on collaborative projects outside of the classroom.

In a traditional classroom, when a student makes a misleading or false claim, the instructor typically confronts the claim—perhaps in Socratic fashion—helping the student and the rest of the class rid themselves of errors and misinterpretations. Students learn to be skeptical of claims from other students, looking to the instructor for guidance. Such faith in the instructor is grounded in the instructor's authority and expertise: unlike their peers, instructors have the degrees, the job, the experience, and the gradebook.

In student-centered classrooms, by contrast, the situation is stickier. Instructors cannot correct every problematic claim made in the context of a class. Moreover, we might be wary of correcting students for at least two kinds of reasons. Looking forward, we might want our students to learn to listen to each other critically, to have them learn to help themselves. Such skills are part of what studying philosophy can teach well. Looking backward, we might decenter ourselves to take student empowerment seriously, avoiding asserting epistemic authority that can undermine at least some aspects of student autonomy.

Two Models

We present two models for managing student errors, imagining them as poles between which lie various defensible positions. The first model is the *faculty expertise model* (FEM), according to which it is paramount to maximize the number of true or reasonable claims made in a classroom, even in active-learning or student-centered contexts, so that participants in the class are not misled. FEM is informed by a broadly pragmatist metaphilosophical and pedagogical framework, according to which philosophy is an activity, one main function of which is to empower students to shape their own learning and lives. FEM posits that if students fail to correct themselves or one another, instructors are *prima facie* obligated to correct them. In most actual classroom settings, some degree of heteronomy is the only viable way to foster student autonomy: in order for philosophers-in-training to become autonomous philosophers, they need to heed the prescriptions, in the form of corrections, made by those with more expertise. Doing philosophy

requires some type of practical expertise, which we could oversimplify as the ability to reason properly, i.e., the ability to argue for a thesis by making adequate inferential moves and to diagnose flawed inferences supporting competing theses.

As any professional philosopher knows, it is not easy for philosophers-in-training to master this elusive skill unless someone with the requisite practical expertise shows them in practice, in the course of examining actual philosophical arguments, why the inferences supporting a given thesis are adequate or fallacious. Moreover, instructor corrections need not undermine student autonomy: instructor corrections can bolster student autonomy by providing them with skills without which they will not be able to ascertain the merits of competing theses or arguments. In other words, instructor corrections empower students to appreciate why in philosophy anything goes but not everything works.

To clarify, consider similarities between the practical knowledge that students can acquire in a philosophy class with the practical knowledge in whose acquisition learners rely on those with epistemic authority, such as the use of a new language. As anyone can attest who reflects on the process by which they have mastered a language, the role of the expert is absolutely critical: mere peer correction will almost always prove insufficient.

An instructor who deploys FEM is only *prima facie* obligated to correct student errors. Students may correct themselves or one another instead. The model bolsters student autonomy if certain conditions are met: namely, that the instructor should prioritize empowering students themselves to diagnose and correct errors, serving merely as a last resort. Naturally, the extent to which the instructor intervenes is also determined by factors such as the class level.

FEM is compatible with active-learning and skill-oriented classes. The model does not posit that the instructor is the gatekeeper of the truth, but that correcting content-related errors is a means to correcting skill-related errors. The primary goal of an instructor who deploys the philosophical expertise model is not to teach content—the correct interpretation of a text or the correct answer to a philosophical question—but to teach skills. The model rests on the generally uncontroversial assumption that the instructor has more experience in reasoning philosophically, which does not guarantee that the instructor is in possession of the correct interpretation of a text or argument.

The second model is the *student empowerment model* (SEM), on which it is more important to let students converse and explore than it is for them

to assert claims of high epistemic value. On SEM, the importance of student autonomy entails that instructors should be wary of correcting students who make errant claims. Such corrections emphasize instructor authority at the possible expense of student engagement.

Consider a classroom using a floating-chair policy for classroom conversation. On typical models of classroom conversation, student comments tend to go through the instructor: The instructor calls on a student who asks a question or makes a comment. The instructor responds. The instructor then calls on another student, and the pattern repeats. In contrast, in a floating chair structure, after a student speaks, that student calls on the next speaker, typically another student. The instructor refrains from inserting himself in the conversation unless a student requests input. Instructors thus de-center themselves, empowering students to lead conversation and listen to each other.

Now, imagine a class on moral theory, using a floating chair to discuss the contrast between utilitarianism and Kantian deontology. In the course of discussion, a student says, “The utilitarian would say that affirmative action is unjust because it is a violation of individual rights.” The instructor might be sorely tempted to jump in, perceiving various problems in the student’s claim. “For the utilitarian,” the instructor might reasonably say, invoking their expertise, “Rights are at best a derivative concept. The utilitarian should primarily appeal to the consequences of a policy.”

In contrast, on SEM, the instructor lays low. Inserting one’s voice as a corrective communicates that the student has violated a rule or expectation. The student who makes the errant claim may have their views about utility and rights corrected. All students also receive a message that they do not have free reign to make mistakes. To avoid these outcomes, on SEM, the instructor waits for other students to address the problem. With practice, students learn that making errors is part of the process of doing philosophy and that they can do so without violating classroom norms. Instructors may still raise questions about particular comments without asserting authority. “What do we think about the claim that utilitarians reject policies because of rights considerations?”

Even without explicit corrections or assertions of authority, students often quickly infer an instructor’s views, especially when we disagree with them. Our body language can speak volumes, often in ways that are imperceptible to ourselves, even when we are trying to keep straight faces. There are power structures in any classroom and students are often aware of their places in classroom hierarchies. The instructor who is truly committed to student-directed conversations may need not only to allow student errors, but resist

judging student comments at all. Such an approach can be a challenging exercise in humility for an instructor, to resist our no-buts and embrace our yes-and. Moreover, the proponent of the SEM has to be willing to allow students to walk away from class potentially misinformed. On SEM, we are concerned less with the truth of student beliefs and more with their active engagement with course material and finding their own ways through it.

Of course, every instructor has limits to the kinds of errors we allow, since we all hold classroom norms. On even the most extreme SEM, instructors may consider some views unacceptable even to state. For example, an instructor might believe that there is no legitimate philosophical debate about the humanity of people in certain racial or ethnic categories. Following the SEM, instructors will typically involve students in conversation about such norms early in the term, so that the students can learn to self-regulate.

The central goal of the SEM is to help students to develop skills for effective philosophical conversation that they can take into contexts that do not include instructors. The SEM helps them to practice those skills. The instructor takes as light a touch as possible, framing or summarizing, adding comments only on request.

Applications

Instructors rightly have varying preferred positions between these extreme poles. Differences may emerge from considering different claims in different contexts. Consider, for example, the following problematic claims:

- Clear Factual Error, e.g. “ $7+5=11$.”
- Philosophical Error, e.g. “Hume’s arguments for the problem of induction are terrible.”
- Moral Error, e.g. “Trans women are, of course, really men.”

Various contexts might also lead to different kinds of responses. We briefly consider each of these three types of claims in a few representative contexts.

Large Classes

SEM is typically unavailable in large lectures and difficult to manage even in classes of thirty or forty. Indeed, the question hardly arises, since both models are constructed to apply to active-learning classrooms. Instructors may implement active-learning strategies in large classes by

using small-group work, but such conversations are rarely regulated by instructors. Conversations in large classrooms typically require strong instructor leadership.

Moral errors and other violations of classroom norms require correction as a matter of course.³ A clear factual error might be too unimportant to merit comment, or corrections may be handled gently without being problematic assertion of authority (e.g., “I think you mean twelve”). In response to a less clear factual or philosophical error, the instructor can approach a SEM by reflecting questions to the class rather than correcting the errant claim.

While FEM seems ideally suited for large classes, its application to these settings in fact poses challenges very similar to those faced by SEM: namely, finding feasible ways of correcting student errors by means of active-learning strategies that do not undermine student autonomy. While addressing these challenges in large classes proves difficult regardless of which model one subscribes to, an instructor who subscribes to FEM can manage student errors by asking the students questions which empower them to diagnose and address the error in question; in other words, an instructor who subscribes to FEM strives to serve as a last resort in correcting errors. Still, on the FEM, factual and philosophical errors must be addressed, to avoid propagating misunderstanding, whereas the proponent of the SEM is more comfortable allowing students to remain misinformed.

Small Classes

In small classes, say seminars of fifteen students, the contrast between an FEM and an SEM is more obvious. Again, the minor factual error may not merit attention. Violations of accepted norms and moral errors are again essential to address; in both large and small classes, we must avoid normalizing bad behavior.

There is a world of room between these extremes of simple factual errors and violations of norms. Here an instructor’s pedagogical style is defined. On SEM in introductory classes, students are less familiar with norms of philosophical discussion and more likely to seek an instructor’s expertise and the FEM may be more natural. In upper-level classes, when students are more eager for free rein and more stunted in their development by frequent correction, the SEM is most at home.

While the contrast between FEM and SEM becomes most obvious in small classes, so do the similarities. Since both FEM and SEM share the goal

of student autonomy, instructors on both models will hope that students themselves address errors. Given that the main difference between FEM and SEM is the emphasis placed on the value of heteronomy as a route to intellectual autonomy, an instructor who subscribes to FEM will not especially worry about making assertions of authority, even in small classes, in hopes of bolstering, not undermining, student autonomy.

Introductory or Gen Ed Classes

Faculty expertise can be of special importance in introductory classes, because of both our greater knowledge of concepts and our experience in critical conversations. It's important to model good philosophical discussion and to get students started with a firm foundation. Students new to philosophy typically make a lot of errors. The FEM might be a better approach at the introductory level.

Concomitantly, the importance of supporting student engagement and inclusion entails that we must be wary of asserting our authority heavily. Most students come to philosophy tentatively. As a discipline, we have struggled especially to welcome members of under-represented identity groups. It may be more important to encourage engagement than to correct the factual or philosophical error. Even the moral error might be handled more gently in introductory classrooms, though instructors must be wary of normalizing dangerous language or views.

Various Institutional Contexts

SEM seems more likely to work with small classes, whereas large class sizes can be seen as the natural home for FEM. We might thus expect institutions with more small classes to see more SEM and larger institutions, with larger classes, to see more FEM. One might go on to assume that SEM is likely to work best at selective institutions, where students tend to come well prepared to autonomously steer their college classroom experience. We must be careful here, though, as general preparedness for college-level courses does not necessarily equate to preparedness for doing philosophy. Indeed, the former may engender attitudes—such as arrogance or entitlement—which are inconsistent with the latter. In these settings, SEM may simply validate these attitudes, instead of challenging them. Therefore, FEM alone, or a combination of both models, might be better suited to (some) selective institutions.

Conversely, one might go on to assume that FEM works best at institutions serving student populations that, for various reasons, are somehow lacking in their ability to actively participate in college-level class conversations. But we must be careful here, too. After all, these student populations, which often include students from disadvantaged backgrounds, tend to be lacking in traits such as self-confidence (*qua* learners), and it is precisely these deficits that SEM is ideally equipped to address. Therefore, a combination of SEM and FEM that (at least at the early stages of the process) gives more centrality to SEM might be better suited to (some) institutions that serve these student populations.

Summary: Between the Poles

Teachers must find their own voices. In determining how and when to correct student errors, instructors committed to student development, as we imagine proponents of both poles, must consider both the kind of error and the classroom context. Does the error violate norms, so that it must be swiftly addressed? If not, we should weigh the consequences of correction. Is instructor intervention likely to produce a better result, both long term and short term? Are we respecting the development of long-term autonomy by empowering students to avoid blunders? Are we asserting authority in ways that will turn students away from further philosophy? Cultural differences, both of student backgrounds and institutional context, may be relevant. An instructor's pedagogical style or identity may dictate a pole of preference, too. The co-authors of this chapter have discrepant approaches. Whichever way you lean, and however far, it is important to recognize the effects of intervention in conversation, both on learning philosophical content and on empowering students to lead and listen in conversation.⁴

Notes

1. Active learning helps students to proceed to higher levels of cognition, for example in Bloom's taxonomy or Fink's taxonomy of significant learning (Fink 2013). On Bloom: See Anderson et al. 2001 for the revised Bloom's taxonomy; Bloom 1956 for the original; Armstrong 2010 for an effective overview. For evidence of the effectiveness of active learning strategies,

- see Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1998; Freeman et al 2014 and Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 2014.
2. See Freire 1968 for the ur-text on student empowerment. See Whiteside 1980 for an example of a student-designed introductory philosophy course.
 3. See Van Orman 2019 for some suggestions for how to do so.
 4. Thanks to the editor and to audiences at the 2022 Biennial Workshop Conference of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers at Otterbein University and at the Panel of the Association for the Philosophy of Education at the 2023 APA Pacific Division Meeting in San Francisco. Thanks also to Ann Cahill (Elon University) for useful conversation about the floating chair model of classroom conversation.

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