

Philosophy as Dialogue & as Gift: Philosophy In and Beyond the Classroom

**By Oli Belas* & the students who took “Introduction to Educational
Philosophy” (autumn/winter 2021)**

I coordinate a second-year undergraduate module on philosophy and education, open to students on several of our Education and English degree courses. The module ran for the first time between September and December 2021. The curriculum isn't prescribed, but decided by the students, who, in the first week, identified the topics and issues they wanted to discuss.

In an early session on curriculum design and assessment, I mentioned the work of John White. Students asked a number of questions, generally along the lines of “But what would John White say about x?” – and x would be some current educational issue or debate. After several such questions, I said, “Maybe I'll just ask John

White.” I emailed John, asking if he’d be willing to record a short video in which he’d talk the students through his thoughts on curriculum design. John wrote back: yes, of course he’d do this; he’d send some notes and we’d set a date. Those “notes” were a 1500-word essay, gifted to the students. John has subsequently shared that piece through [ResearchGate](#).

Towards the end of the video recording, John asked to be kept in the loop as to how the students got on with the philosophy module, and that request struck a chord with several of the students – one of whom asked, mid semester, “so how *are* we going to feed back to John White?” At semester’s end, we agreed that the students would feed back to me, and that I’d try to piece their comments together – a gift in kind, perhaps, to John.

Student Reflections: Philosophy as “Active Thinking”

The co-construction of the curriculum set the tone of the module: students felt they had a stake in the discussions, that there was collective ownership of the module, and that philosophy could be an active way of life – an “expanded way of thinking,” as someone put it; “active thinking,” another said. Because sessions were very much

discussion-based, the idea that you might “catch up” on a missed session using the teacher’s slides and notes (which were deliberately skeletal – usually little more than a few guide questions on the week’s reading and possible discussion points) was virtually meaningless. This was generally a positive, but it did create a few obvious problems (not only how to catch up, but how to review and revise sessions).

Because discussion was so often rooted in personal experience, the class-size needed to be relatively small. There were around fifteen in the class, which meant a relatively safe and trust-based space could be established, in which potentially uncomfortable conversations could happen. (In a recent [article](#) and subsequent [roundtable discussion](#) with Uvanney Maylor, Shirin Housee has discussed, with respect to decolonizing and antiracist educational practice, the importance of creating such spaces.) Classroom layout mattered: as standard, our classroom would be arranged in rows. A few weeks into the module, students asked to set up a round-table classroom, so that they could all make eye-contact with and speak to one another. This seemingly small change to the physical environment (which took only minutes while students arrived) made a significant,

positive difference to conversation. A much larger class, one too big for roundtable discussion, would, the students said, have produced a less intimate environment and very different – likely more guarded – conversations.

Teacher Reflections

The module wasn't perfect, of course; no module can be all things to all folks. I realize, too, that what we did last semester wouldn't be recognized, by some, as philosophy "proper" at all (canonical philosophers didn't get a look in this time around; they may in future iterations). That last point, for good or bad, doesn't worry me very much. I took part in this module shortly after reading [Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernen's *The Teaching Archive*](#), one aim of which is to challenge the presumed opposition between teaching and research. Using archival evidence, they show that, far from being a space in which academic work is disseminated "down," the classroom is very often a space in which new ideas are minted, and only subsequently shared through academic papers and books. That was my experience on this module – the classroom as a cooperative laboratory space, in which my thinking and writing about philosophy, education, and research (especially the spaces and conditions in

which these happen) took sometimes new, sometimes renewed, shape.¹

Three concluding thoughts: First, week on week, students didn't learn philosophy so much as do profound and original philosophical work. Second, the exchanges – both direct and indirect – between me, the students, and John were not primarily about the communication or “delivery” of “curricular content.” Rather, the exchange was itself philosophical: philosophy less as an academic tradition, more a mode of living, of active and expanded thinking (to repeat the students' comments). Third, this post is a collaborative response to John's gifted essay, produced as a response to a request from me, prompted by questions and comments from the students, whose questions were spurred by what I said John had (or might have) said in his work... And around and around we go: real philosophy co-created through dialogue in and beyond the classroom – or, better, the lab.

The logo for pesgb, consisting of the lowercase letters 'pesgb' in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid teal square.

¹As well as Buurma and Heffernen, see work on collaborative, democratic, and participatory education (by, among others, [Fulford, Lockrobin, and Smith](#); [Hopkins](#); [Sticker](#)). See also, as an act of collaborative philosophy, Fisher and Fisher's post, to this blog, on thoughtwashing.

References

All references hyperlinked in main text.

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