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Chapter 17
TikTok is Not Peer Reviewed: Modifying Assignments to Nurture Habits of Mind

Rachel Robison-Greene

During any given semester, my most engaged students send me materials related to what we are discussing in class. I always appreciate students' excitement about the course content and the opportunity to experience different forums for conversation with my students. As the years have passed, however, more of the material students pass along comes in the form of YouTube videos. These videos will often star popular YouTube personalities who create content that has millions of views. Sometimes, the ideas the students pass along come in the form of short TikTok videos. This is all fine and even entertaining until this material starts to make its way into coursework. While I do not mind if the Internet sparks interest in my students, I would prefer that social media "influencers" do not shape the content of my student's papers, since ideas presented in that medium are not subject to any sort of peer review or fact checking.

This became a challenge with the final assignment at the end of each of my ethics courses. Students must grapple with a contemporary moral issue in the form of an argumentative paper. At first, I was quite flexible about the moral issue they selected. I encouraged them to pick a topic that was interesting to them. I have had students write on the kind of issues you might imagine in a course on ethics, such as abortion, euthanasia, or the death penalty. But I have also had students write on issues like the obligation states have to provide inclusive sex education that acknowledges that not all people are cisgender or heterosexual or our moral obligations to find alternate forms of energy in response to the threats posed by global climate change. For this freshman-level undergraduate course, the final version of the paper is five double-spaced pages long. I want the process to be meaningful for them; they use this as an opportunity to apply the knowledge they gained in the class. For years, however, it seemed that some of the students were not taking the assignment seriously and were instead completing it in a rushed way right before it was due at the very end of the semester. This led them to use the information-gathering practices that are at their fingertips—the sites they are most familiar with on the Internet.

Over the past several years, I have changed the design of my ethics courses to create a better learning experience for students that also overcomes the common challenges we have faced in the past. The assignment is now more narrowly tailored to achieve the Habits of Mind and portable skills that I am hoping to nurture in my students in these classes. In particular, I try to develop Habits of Mind identified by Costa and Kallick (2009) such as questioning and problem posing, listening with understanding and empathy, persistence, and thinking about their thinking. In this chapter, I first outline my course objectives in the form of the Habits of Mind. I then discuss the assignment I gave my students originally and identify the challenges and shortcomings it posed. Then, I outline my new approach and detail how it is better suited to achieve my objectives.

The Great Conversation and Habits of Mind

A good philosophy class is a training course for virtuous Habits of Mind. The philosophical enterprise is committed to careful and rigorous thinking. It is perhaps the original discipline that focuses on the Habit of Mind that Costa and Kallick (2009) identify as "thinking about your thinking," or metacognition. Of course, this is not to say that philosophers always do this well. The history of philosophy is densely populated with figures who take themselves to be offering reasonable, clear-headed arguments for what turn out to be absurd and even offensive

positions. Nevertheless, our best chance of recognizing bad arguments or bias on the part of either ourselves or others is to think carefully about the nature of our reasons and to share and evaluate those reasons with one another. I encourage my students to develop intellectual humility and the willingness to consider that they might be wrong. Even if they end up arguing for the position they originally held, I want them to go through the process of critically analyzing and responding to other positions. This involves both being reflective about their own thinking and listening to the thoughts of others with empathy and understanding.

When a person engages in philosophy in good faith, they render themselves intellectually vulnerable. In his dialogues, Plato portrays the citizens of Athens taking on this vulnerability with varying degrees of patience and success. The Socratic Method requires participants to subject their beliefs to reflection and critique. The expectation is not that a person will accept, reject, or revise their views in response to the strength of the arguments offered in reply. When we construct arguments in this spirit, we put forth reasons that we think others will feel rationally compelled to accept. This is a cornerstone of liberal democracy—the ability to provide and respond to reasons. This involves several of Costa and Kallick's (2009) Habits of Mind. In particular, it involves developing the ability both to think about their own thinking and to think interdependently. Reasoning is an enterprise that we often engage in together and these Habits of Mind are critical for being a good citizen and community member.

Habits of Mind are important when it comes to resolving ethical issues. To get students in my ethics courses engaging in metacognition and interdependent thinking, I use relevant contemporary case studies. For example, I give them a short reading on the topic of the use of robots to provide medical care for the elderly. I first have them take a moment to write down some of their own thoughts about the issue. This is a deliberate attempt to get them thinking about their own thinking. Then, we break into small groups where students can think interdependently. In their groups I ask them to structure their own arguments and come up with what they take to be the most charitable arguments that someone on the side with which they disagree might offer. In this case, students are left thinking about the benefits of using emerging technology to assist populations that may not have family or resources to access more traditional forms of care. They also consider the role of technology in our society and question whether automation is an appropriate solution for all problems or whether some labor is and should remain distinctively human. I find that these students, who have grown up with an abundance of technology, are at first often optimistic or perhaps fatalistic about the use of technology in our culture. After our discussion, they are more sensitive to a range of human values. These in-class activities model the kind of learning outcomes I want to see in each version of their papers later in the course.

When philosophical education is done well, it encourages active listening. One cannot listen actively without the Habit of Mind of striving for understanding and empathy. Active listening involves a sincere attempt to understand where another person is coming from. This contributes to the development of virtue in several ways. First, if what we are engaged in is a search after truth, we are better able to arrive at it through earnest engagement with the ideas of others. Second, active listening makes us more compassionate and empathetic. We may not agree with someone even after we have listened to them carefully, but we do come away with a better understanding of who they are and why they think what they do. We might then be less likely to create harmful in group/out group dynamics that demonize the other and cast members of the in group as infallible.

Teaching my students to actively listen is also crucial to fostering an inclusive classroom. Students have diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ideas about which we will all benefit from hearing. I hope that my students will come away with the ability to charitably listen to others,

whether in the form of speech or writing. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) describes the transformative nature of such an experience:

> To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself. (p. 3)

One way that I try to ensure that students are charitably listening to others is by encouraging them, when critiquing arguments, to first try to summarize the argument they are critiquing. This requires them to imaginatively project themselves into the minds of people with whom they disagree. It requires them to assume that the person offering the argument is rational and well-intentioned and to move forward from there. I also make sure that the case studies I present to my students get them thinking empathetically about a wide range of groups. For instance, thinking about problems that face the elderly might force students to encounter their own ageism. Thinking about challenges and injustices in the criminal justice system gets students thinking less retributively about incarcerated people. Considering the health challenges of immigrants and refugees gets students to reexamine their attitudes about our obligations to people who have been displaced.

I find that when I present a diversity of issues to my students in this way, there will always be students who have been directly impacted by them in their lives outside of school. If I have done my job in making my classroom a comfortable space for my students to express themselves, these students will often be vocal representatives for the people affected in the case study. For instance, many of my students have had real experience with grandparents who have dementia, so when we talk about obligations to the elderly, they can make these topics real for the students who have not gone through similar experiences. This is why thinking interdependently is so crucial. Interrogating one's own thoughts and attitudes can only go so far.

It is important to me that students develop good critical-thinking skills that they can use in their face-to-face interactions, but I feel strongly that developing these skills in their reading and writing nurtures unique Habits of Mind. Robert Maynard Hutchins (1994) has described philosophy as "the great conversation." The written word has facilitated that conversation. Writing transmits ideas through the centuries and puts us in a position to engage with the thoughts of people who died thousands of years before any of us were born. It allows us to grapple with the problem of other minds by presenting us with ideas brought into existence by those minds and, in this way, we achieve a kind of intimacy with the other that may not otherwise be achievable. Writing, when done well, requires dedication, precision, and discipline in a way that other methods of conveying ideas often do not. Reading what someone else has written can also be a transformative experience. Understanding this assists in further developing the habit of thinking interdependently. We think not only with others who are currently present but also with a history of written word through time. Consider, for example, the experiences of reading that Malcom X describes in his autobiography:

> I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read woke in me inside some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. (X & Haley, 1989)

The sense that reading and writing can cause one to be "mentally alive" suggests that these endeavors are intellectually, culturally, and socially important. When our students develop these skills, they open the potential to become lifelong learners. In my classes, I have my students participate in this discourse by writing papers in which they engage with the work of others as if they are having a conversation with them.

Finally, I want my students to learn to be effective managers of their time and this requires developing the Habit of Mind of persistence—persevering with a task through to completion (Costa & Kallick, 2009). This will serve them well in the world and will contribute to their psychological well-being. They will also find that they produce higher quality work when they do not leave it until the last minute. I want them to recognize that earnest investigation into a question takes time.

The ability to carefully construct arguments and the courage to be intellectually humble and vulnerable require the Habit of Mind of thinking about one's own thinking, the skills and willingness to listen charitably requires listening with understanding and empathy, the patience and focus required to get the most from reading and writing and the ability to manage time well to maximize learning opportunities require persistence. These are all Habits of Mind that I would ideally like my classroom to nurture. At one point, I thought that if the content of the course was sufficiently philosophical, these objectives would likely be satisfied naturally. Through trial and error, I realized that, if I wanted to see these outcomes, I would need to be more intentional about my course design.

Overcoming Obstacles

When I began assigning papers in my ethics classes, I had a single deadline for the end of each course. I set time aside to discuss my expectations and to address any questions that students might have. I allowed students to choose their own topic but required them to discuss it with me early in the semester to make sure that it was appropriate for the subject matter of the course (e.g., I made sure that the question was not purely empirical or legal). I talked students through how to write a good philosophy paper, and I provided them with some additional resources about how to do it.

Students generally performed well on the paper assignment, but semester after semester I encountered the same problems in the papers of those who did not. Many of the problems were connected to how students use the Internet. Humanity has access to information like never before; there is also access to *misinformation* like never before. The Internet also encourages familiar fallacies and cognitive biases that manifest themselves in new and unexpected ways.

One of the most significant challenges that I face as an ethics professor is battling confirmation bias among my students. When I tell them to write about a contemporary moral issue, they often see it as an "easy A." They imagine that all they need to do is pick something they feel strongly about and explain why they feel strongly about it. When students approach the assignment in this way, they are more likely to seek sources of information that confirm their established strong feelings. For example, many students in our community come into the class with strong attitudes about abortion. When framing their question for the paper, they are likely to investigate the question "Why is abortion wrong?" rather than inquiring into the strongest arguments for and against abortion. When this is the methodology, students engage in both confirmation bias and question begging. They either bypass or engage inauthentically with the Habit of Mind that Costa and Kallick (2009) call "questioning and problem posing."

A related challenge is that many students do most of their research online. Often, this simply involves Googling the topic and clicking on the first websites that come up, especially those websites that confirm the student's biases. Students will cite the host of their favorite

YouTube channel and will occasionally even reference TikTok. Sometimes this happens because students are busy people. Other times it happens because the student has never been taught how to engage in research. The information they see on the Internet is curated by algorithms that cater to the existing viewpoints of the students. These kinds of sources tend to be uncharitable to differing perspectives. If these are the only sources that students access, then my assignment has had the opposite effect from the one I wanted it to have—it caused students to think dogmatically rather than critically and to provide strawman arguments in place of the real positions of those with whom they disagree. They then fail to adopt the Habit of Mind that is listening with understanding and empathy to other positions on the topic.

For example, in my *Environmental Ethics* course, we have a unit on animal ethics. Students often have attitudes about vegetarians and vegans that are not supported by evidence. A paper in opposition to veganism strikes many students as a nonthreatening paper to write; they are taking no real risks. I have had a surprising number of students use the YouTube channels or personal websites of social media influencers who are body builders to support the argument that it is impossible for vegans and vegetarians to get enough protein or B12 to live healthy lives. The ability to use videos created by perceived members of their peer group encourages students to engage in fallacious appeals to popularity and common practice rather than thinking through ideas rigorously and in response to counterargument.

Finally, like all professors, I struggle with students plagiarizing. Emerging technology has offered up yet another reason for us to worry—the potential ChatGPT has to craft convincing imitations of student work. My objectives are obviously not being met if student papers are being written by artificial intelligence (AI). I knew that if I wanted the assignment to be meaningful to my students, I needed to make some changes to deal with these problems. I have made significant modifications to my paper assignment and have been pleased by the results.

Narrowly Tailoring Assignments to Meet Objectives

I knew that I wanted my students to approach their paper in the spirit of honest inquiry. I also knew that if I wanted them to do this, I would need to give them the tools to do it successfully. My new assignment has four parts, each intended to address one or more of the teaching challenges I described above. First, I have my students participate in a library readiness module. Second, I have them submit a short version of their paper for peer review by other members of the class. Third, I have them submit a draft for feedback from the instructor. Finally, at the end of the course, they submit their final draft.

During the library readiness module, I prepare my students to do the initial research for their papers. Philosophers do not engage in empirical research, though I am a firm believer that, when done well, philosophy is informed by interdisciplinary empirical findings. In this field, research consists of accessing the arguments that others have made and coming to an understanding of the general trend of discourse on a particular issue. It is only when one has a strong understanding of what others have said and what is commonly understood to be at stake in a debate, that one can meaningfully contribute to that debate. Peer reviewed publications are an essential part of this debate, but my ethics students are not often familiar with peer review. I now spend a day discussing what peer review is and why it is important. This is not always as straightforward as it sounds because some students are dubious about the existence of expertise. I must make the case that requiring students to use peer-reviewed articles is not just some form of academic elitism that arbitrarily prioritizes some belief formation processes over others. In philosophy, it can be particularly difficult to convince students that peer review is not just a form of gatekeeping conversations that should be open to all.

Another problem that I frequently encounter is that students believe that ethical judgments are nothing more than expressions of individual opinion, so they conclude that there is no *real* "research" work to be done. If this is the case, they reason, then there is no motivation to seek out certain kinds of articles or arguments over others; they are just opinions, after all. Here, I take the opportunity to emphasize the value of "the great conversation" within philosophical ethics. I point out to students that most people have the intuition that the world has improved over time: the occurrence of human slavery has significantly reduced, women and minorities have rights, one cannot be executed in most areas of the world for the content of one's religious beliefs, and so on. At least in part, we have the great conversation to thank for some of these developments. It is only by listening to one another with understanding and empathy that we have been able to advance in these ways. I let them know that it is important to access peer-reviewed books and articles because thinkers who have been through the review process are more likely to have engaged in informed ways with the existing literature and their arguments have been deemed useful to publish by reviewers who are also experts in the context. I point out that some arguments have better structures than others as a matter of logic, and that the premises of some arguments are supported by verifiable facts while others are not. Moreover, some moral principles are better able to withstand critical reflection and debate than others. This is, after all, the whole point of the course and is fundamental to the learning objectives.

After I have motivated the kind of research I would like students to do, I ask them to complete an assignment through the library website. This assignment teaches them how to use academic search engines. It is a low-stakes assignment, and it is easy to complete. The goal is to develop both confidence and information literacy. It assists them in the Habit of Mind that is questioning and problem posing. It gets them thinking more thoughtfully about what it is to pose a problem in good faith.

The second stage of the assignment is to craft a short (three-page) version of the paper to submit for peer review. This version of the paper contains a student's main argument and discussion of the most compelling arguments against it. They are assigned a peer on Canvas to review their draft, and they are each assigned a peer to review in turn. This stage of the assignment contributes to several of my learning objectives. First, it encourages listening with understanding and empathy on the part of both students. To craft meaningful comments, the student engaging in peer review must charitably interpret the argument contained in the paper and provide feedback. When the student who wrote the paper receives the feedback, they can develop the skill of responding to constructive criticism. This also contributes to an inclusive classroom setting because students receive feedback from peers from a wide variety of backgrounds. Peer review also creates a greater degree of accountability for the students than the alternative of simply receiving feedback from me. It is common for students to care more about the perspectives of their peers than they do the perspective of their instructors.

I assign this peer-reviewed draft midway through the semester, and I keep the point allotment for it low-stakes. Sharing work with one's peers requires courage and persistence, so I want to keep the grading risks low. Students find that they have crafted the most challenging part of the paper early on. The rest is easy.

The third stage of the assignment is the draft that the students submit for feedback from me. Here, in addition to evaluating the arguments, I look at how well they have satisfied the requirements for the previous assignments. I look at whether they have effectively used databases to identify good sources for their research. I also look at whether they have incorporated the feedback of their peers or provided some reason why they have chosen not to do so. The feedback from me helps with the objective of thinking interdependently. Overall, the input they receive is an iterative process that simulates the great conversation. It also makes it

difficult for students to use AI to craft their assignments because each stage builds on the previous and on the responses the students have received from peers and instructor.

In the last stage, students respond to the feedback I have provided them and submit the final version of their paper. They should feel confident in the outcome at this point because they have worked through many versions and received comments. This helps to ward off the anxiety they feel about writing what is, in many cases, their first philosophy paper. This stage of the assignment is worth the most points, but in a way, it is also the least intimidating version to turn in. Students are allowed to use what they have written in earlier drafts, so they already know the strengths and weaknesses of their papers and have been given opportunities to make changes.

In the end, the students have modeled for themselves the process of giving and responding to reasons as part of an ongoing conversation. In this way, they have modeled Costa and Kallick's (2009) Habit of Mind of thinking interdependently. They have also practiced effective time management—they worked on their papers early and often, crafting them into meaningful work that they can be proud of. In the process of doing so, they have developed the Habit of Mind that Costa and Kallick refer to as persistence.

Conclusion

I have been pleased with the results of these changes I have made to my courses. Students report enjoying the process, too. I have noticed significant improvement in paper quality over other versions of this assignment. Students engage the relevant literature on the topic without turning to sources that encourage poor critical thinking practices. My favorite aspect of the change is that the writing process is less individualistic and focuses more on discourse among groups of people to improve the quality of ideas. As social beings, we often reason best when we reason together. We thrive when we think interdependently and listen with understanding and empathy.

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