

## PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Portland State University  
University Studies  
PHL331U

The only real education comes from what goes counter to you. Andre Gide

Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence. Robert Lee Frost

Those who can't do, teach. Those who can't teach, teach gym. Woody Allen

**Professor:** Peter Boghossian (please call me “Peter”)

**Required texts:** none

**Meeting days/times:** Mondays, 5:00-6:30pm PST

Join URL: <https://pdx.zoom.us/j/88418903582>

**Office hour (zoom):** Mondays, 1:00-2:30pm PST

Join URL: <https://pdx.zoom.us/j/82188382974>

**Suggested reading:** Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*.

***Controversy disclaimer\****

This course deals with controversial topics related to people’s beliefs about education, society, politics, economics, morality, and assumptions. I hope to challenge you to think about your beliefs in all these areas, and others. My goal is to teach you *how* to think about your beliefs, not *what* to think about them. I have my own set of beliefs that I have developed over the decades, which I do not attempt to hide or suppress... my goal is not to convince you of anything other than to critically examine your beliefs.

\*Excerpts from skeptic Michael Shermer’s syllabus.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zms3EqGbFOk> (starts at 1:06)

***Grading***

There is one quiz per week. Each quiz has 10 questions. Each question is worth one point.

*There is nothing else to submit. Nothing else is graded. There are no bonuses or extra-credit assignments. You will not be graded on suggested/optional material, which will be specifically noted on the syllabus as such.*

Letter Grade	Points
A	95-100
A-	90-94
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	65-66
F	Under 65

### *Week One*

#### TOPICS

- The nature and purpose of education
- Class goals
- Syllabus review
- What is education?

#### **Read**

- Plato's Republic, Book VII:  
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>
- Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*  
<http://www.anthoniflood.com/whiteheadeducation.htm>

#### **Watch**

- Dr. Steven Pinker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcdFI6Sda0k#t=896>

#### **Suggested Historical Reading**

- John Locke, "The Exercise of Reason"
- John Locke, "Reasoning with Children"
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Education of Nature"
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Against Reasoning with Children"
- Aristotle, "Liberal v. Mechanical Education"
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Learning the Value of Work"

### ***Reflection Questions***

- What topics and questions would you like to see addressed over the coming term?
- Are there any topics/issues you would like to avoid? Why?  
Can you think of any guest speakers you would like to address the class?  
Can you think of any specific issues that you would like them to address?
- What are your expectations for this class?
- What does it mean to be educated?
  - Does this definition change over time?
  - What role does culture play in answering this question?
- Is education a right or a privilege? Why?
- What is the purpose of a public education?
  - Rank the following in order of importance:
    - To prepare students for the workplace
    - To teach students how to get along with each other
    - To prepare students for citizenship
    - To help students to live reflective lives
    - To counter social injustice
    - To educate students (in the classical sense of learning and using content)
    - To promote the general good of society
    - To instill values
    - To babysit children while parents work
    - *Add three more of your own purposes*
- What is the purpose of a college education?
- What do you think most people think is the purpose of a public education?
- What do you think most people think is the purpose of a college education?

- Can someone be wrong about the purpose of a public education?
- If you could either learn a lot from this class and earn a C-, or learn nothing at all and receive an A-, which would you prefer? Why?
  - Is there a correct answer to this question?
  - How should an elementary school student answer this question?
    - Is there a correct answer to this question in grades K-5? 6-10? 11-12?
- What is Whitehead's thesis? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
  - What are three main points that Whitehead makes? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Does how one defines "education" influence public policy?
- Define "education". What are three different definitions? What would Plato say about these definitions?
- What is the nature and purpose of a public education K-12?
  - Of a private K-12 education?
  - Of a public university education?
  - Of a private university education?
    - What goals should the education system embody?
    - What is learning and teaching? What do these words mean?
- Who should decide the content of education? Professors? Politicians? Parents? Students?
  - Note one pro and one con for each of the above interests.

## *Week Two*

### TOPICS

- The idea of a university
- Ideology, polemics, and education
- Evidence and educational policy

### Read

- "The Idea of a University"
- "Progressive Education"

- 5 big ideas that don't work in education:  
<http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/08/13/430050765/five-big-ideas-that-don-t-work-in-education>

### ***Reflection Questions***

- Should education be a tool for promoting social equity? If so, what conception of social equity should it promote?
  - How is equity defined? Who gets to define it? How are disputes about definitions resolved?
- What does it mean to say that an educational system is sustainable? Should educational systems be sustainable?
  - Is sustainability an ideology?
  - Is it testable?
- How does the treatment of education as a commodity influence it? Does it undermine its value?
- What is a "child centered education"?
  - Who are its advocates?
  - What evidence is there that it works?
  - Is there any evidence against it?
  - What are Kremer's main arguments?
    - Do you agree or disagree? Why?
  - Formulate three pros and three cons related to a "child centered education". Rank them according to their merit.
    - Which arguments are stronger? What makes them stronger?
- Should education be a business? Why or why not?
  - Public education?
  - Private education?
  - What role should private, for-profit education play in education?
    - Explain recent controversies surrounding taxpayers and for-profit educational institutions. Do you agree or disagree with these criticisms? Why or why not?

*Week Three*

TOPICS

- Pedagogy
  - Constructivism
  - Behaviorism
- Epistemology 101
- Critical thinking
- Submitting a paper for peer-reviewed publication

**Read**

- Boghossian's "Beh Con Soc" (Behaviorism, Constructivism, and Socratic Pedagogy)
- Boghossian's "Mambo Dog Fish" (Critical Thinking and Constructivism: Mambo Dog Fish to the Banana Patch)
- "Delphi Report" (Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction)

\*\* Please have the appendix (p. 722) for "Beh Con Soc" readily available.

**Questions**

- What does Boghossian claim are the problems with constructivism?
- What is behaviorism?
  - Does it work?
  - Is it effective?
  - How does one know?
- What would constitute reliable evidence for behaviorism?
  - For Constructivism?
- How could studies be designed to test the effectiveness of behaviorism? Of constructivism?
- Why is it important to test hypotheses through the use of studies?
  - Relate your answer to public policy. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- What are the differences between a research study and a scholarly paper?
- Can constructivism foster critical thinking?
  - What does Boghossian claim? Why?
- What ideologies are associated with various pedagogies?
  - Formulate two hypotheses as to why an ideology and a pedagogy would be wedded.
- According to the Delphi Report, how is critical thinking defined?
  - Do you agree or disagree? Why?
  - Which of the core critical thinking constructs do you think are most/least important? Why?
- What is a corrective mechanism and why is it important?
- Is one of your goals to publish in a peer-reviewed journal?
  - Why or why not?
  - Do you think this is only helpful if one would like to enter a career in academia?
- What does Boghossian claim is the relationship between a stable metaphysics and critical thinking?
- What is "True Justified Belief"?
- What is Wittgenstein's private language argument and how does Boghossian claim this relates to constructivist pedagogy?
- Boghossian writes, "Constructivists do not, to borrow wording from American philosopher John Caputo, betray epistemology with metaphysics". What does he mean by this?
- What makes a constructivist radical?
  - Do all forms of constructivism lead to metaphysical instability? What does this mean?
- What does Boghossian claim is the relationship between epistemological relativism and constructivism?
- What does Boghossian claim is the relationship between critical thinking and epistemological relativism?



*Week Four*

TOPICS

- Pedagogy
- The Socratic method
- The Socratic method applied
- Prison inmates
- Critical thinking
- Example Socratic sessions

**Read:**

- Boghossian's Broken Egg (Socratic Pedagogy: Perplexity, humiliation, shame and a broken egg)
- Boghossian's Socratic Pedagogy, Critical Thinking, and Offender Programming
- Boghossian's SP Inmate Ed
- Boghossian's How Socratic Pedagogy
- Boghossian's People to Propositions

**Suggested:**

- Plato's *Meno* <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/meno.html>
- Damon Horowitz's TED talk:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/damon\\_horowitz\\_philosophy\\_in\\_prison.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/damon_horowitz_philosophy_in_prison.html)

**Questions**

- According to Boghossian, what are the stages of the Socratic method?
- According to Boghossian, what are the advantages of the Socratic method?

- Does the Socratic method have any positive epistemological ambitions?
- In the *Meno*, explain the role of the slave boy. What do you think about Socrates' questions?
  - What are Socrates' underlying beliefs that inform this interaction? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- According to Boghossian, how does the Socratic method promote critical thinking?
  - Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- How does Socratic pedagogy work?
  - What does it mean for a pedagogy to work?
  - What does it mean for a pedagogy to not work?
- How can Socratic pedagogy be used to help inmates desist from crime? Do you think it's effective? Why or why not?
- Is there something inherent in Socratic pedagogy that can help to successfully navigate questions of power inherent in classroom dynamics?
- Is the goal of the Socratic method to perplex participants?
- How do the various philosophers Boghossian notes explain perplexity?
  - What is the relationship, if any, between perplexity and pedagogy?
- In the *Meno*, what was Socrates' goal in working with the slave boy? Was he effective?
- What is the elenchus?
- In a Socratic dialogue, explain the role and use of the counterexample.
- What is the difference between humiliation and shame?
  - How does this relate to Boghossian's arguments regarding pedagogical confusion?
- According to Boghossian, can a Socratic teacher be a constructivist? Why or why not? ("Beh Con Soc")
- According to Boghossian, can a Socratic teacher be a behaviorist? Why or why not? ("Beh Con Soc")
- Analyze Boghossian's Socratic dialogues with prison inmates; are there any emerging themes?

- Can these themes be tied into the broader literature on pedagogy?
- Can the Socratic method counter power differentials inherent in communicative interactions?
- In “People to Propositions,” what is Boghossian’s thesis regarding race, gender and the Socratic method? Is he correct? Why or why not?

## Week Five

### TOPICS

- Socratic Session
  - Constructing and conducting Socratic seminars
- John Rawls
  - Rationally deriving values

### Read

- John Rawls: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/> 1.0 and 4 to 4.8

### Watch

- Political Theory — John Rawls <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-JQ17X6VNg>

### Suggested Reading:

- Jonathan Kozol on *Savage Inequalities*: <http://www.amazon.com/Savage-Inequalities-Children-Americas-Schools/dp/0770435688>

### Questions

- Nozick wrote, “Should a family devote its resources to maximizing the position of its least well off and talented child, holding back the other children or using resources for their education and development only if they will follow a policy throughout their lifetimes of maximizing the position of their least fortunate sibling? Surely not. How then can this even be considered as the appropriate policy for enforcement in the wider society?”
  - Please respond to his question.
  - How do you think Rawls would respond? Why?
- Explain how/why one would argue that trickle down economics have a utilitarian foundation. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Can the tragedy of the commons be extended to education?
  - K-12? University?
- Rawls writes, “Justice is fairness”. What does he mean by this? How does this apply to the issue of school vouchers?
- Define fairness?

- Is a flat tax fair?
- In Plato's *Republic*, Thrasymachus argues that justice is in the interest of the strong. What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree?
  - Are the interests of the strong and the interests of the weak necessarily divergent?
    - What parties represent the strong?
  - Are the interests of the rich and the interests of the poor necessarily at odds?
- How does Rawls' idea that every citizen is entitled to a "public education of the first rate" comport with his conception of justice as fairness?
- What are the savage inequalities that Kozol talks about?

### Week Six

#### TOPICS

- Continued from week 5

#### Read

- *Brown v. the Board of Education*:  
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=347&invol=483>

#### Watch

- Charles Leadbeater's TED talk:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/charles\\_leadbeater\\_on\\_education.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/charles_leadbeater_on_education.html)
- Ken Robinson's TED talk:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html)
- Peter Norvig's TED talk:  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_norvig\\_the\\_100\\_000\\_student\\_classroom](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_norvig_the_100_000_student_classroom)
- Faith Jegede's TED talk:  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/faith\\_jegade\\_cole\\_what\\_i\\_ve\\_learned\\_from\\_my\\_autistic\\_brothers](https://www.ted.com/talks/faith_jegade_cole_what_i_ve_learned_from_my_autistic_brothers)

#### Questions

- What is Leadbeater's thesis?
- What is Robinson's thesis?
- Is there a relationship between Leadbeater's and Robinson's thesis? What is it?
- What is the main argument in the Brown decision? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What would Rawls say (WWRS) about the Brown decision?
- What would Nozick say (WWNS) about the Brown decision?

## *Week Seven*

### TOPICS

- Topics for this week will depend upon course pacing, student questions, and student interest.

### Read

- Belief in learning styles myth may be detrimental:  
<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2019/05/learning-styles-myth>
- “The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure” by Sean Stevens  
<https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/coddling-of-the-american-mind/>

### Suggested

- Cameron Herold’s TED talk:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/cameron\\_herold\\_let\\_s\\_raise\\_kids\\_to\\_be\\_entrepreneurs.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/cameron_herold_let_s_raise_kids_to_be_entrepreneurs.html)
- The stubborn myth of learning styles:  
<https://www.educationnext.org/stubborn-myth-learning-styles-state-teacher-license-prep-materials-debunked-theory/>
- The myth of “learning styles” (NB, you only get one free article)  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/04/the-myth-of-learning-styles/557687/>
- Lukianoff and Haidt (NB, you only get one free article)  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>
- President Obama delivers remarks on education  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqHz33Q9XC4>

### **Questions**

- What is Herold's thesis?
- Should we train our children to be entrepreneurs? Why or why not?
- Should colleges and universities have an entrepreneurial focus? Why or why not?
- What is falsifiability?
- Should educators challenge student beliefs?
  - In high school?
  - Grade school?
  - College?
  - Graduate school?
  - In certain subject?
  - In all subjects?
- Define "controversy". Are there legitimate and illegitimate controversies?
  - Provide an example of an illegitimate controversy? What makes your example illegitimate?
- Do students have a right not to be offended? Why or why not?
- It has been said, "If one obtains a college degree and one has never been offended, then one has never learned anything". Comment. Do you agree or disagree?
- Regarding curriculum and school design: Who ought to have the authority to make educational decisions in a democracy? Politicians (through voters)? Individual parents? Students?
- What are the consequences of being in a space that's safe from ideas?
  - "Should firefighters really attempt put out house fires by spraying them with large amounts of water?"
    - "No, it's quite clearly not the place of the firemen to be challenging the fires right to burn things."

### *Week Eight*

TOPIC Social Justice Scholarship and Thought

### **Assignments**



- Pluckrose and Lindsay's *Cynical Theories*, Chapter 8
- 2.2 The Use-Mention Distinction, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/quotation/#UseMentDist>
- Dr. Martin Luther King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"  
[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

### *Week Nine*

#### TOPIC Social Justice in Action

#### **Assignments**

- Pluckrose and Lindsay's *Cynical Theories*, Chapter 9
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Purpose of Education"  
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/purpose-education>
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., The Other America  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3H978KIR20&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3H978KIR20&feature=emb_logo)

#### **Suggested**

- Including Samuel: <http://www.includingsamuel.com/home.aspx>
- Educating Peter: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104167/>

#### **Questions**

- Note five arguments for, and five arguments against, inclusion. Rank these in order of their strength.
  - Note one counterargument to each of the arguments you made above.

- Which are the stronger arguments? Why?
- If your child was TAG, would you want her/him in inclusive classrooms? Why or why not?
- If your child suffered from a cognitive disability, would you want her/him in inclusive classrooms? Why or why not?
- If your child suffered from a physical disability, would you want her/him in inclusive classrooms? Why or why not?
  - Revisit week one's questions re. the purpose of education. What would Whitehead say about the above questions

### *Week Ten*

TOPICS An alternative to the ideology of Social Justice

### **Assignments**

- Pluckrose and Lindsay's *Cynical Theories*, Chapter 10
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP4iY1TtS3s>
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've been to the mountaintop"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oehry1JC9Rk&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oehry1JC9Rk&feature=emb_logo)