David Rose, "Personalised, context-based learning: Philosophical theory and contemporary relevance"

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Abstract

Personalised, context-based learning: philosophical theory and contemporary relevance

The paper will outline the innovative teaching approach of personalised student projects in Philosophical Studies at Newcastle University. Context-based learning aims to demonstrate the relevance of both philosophical skills and knowledge outwith the academic domain and to also ground philosophical debate in a 'real' territory for students. Once the teaching approach has been described, the paper will seek to theoretically justify (and to outline the proposed empirical methodology to support these arguments) a series of claims: (1) that the personalized, context-based approach is more successful at both developing and making the student aware of developing specific educational skills (autonomy, independence, critical aptitude, etc.) which are highly desirable and easily transferable; (2) that the student does not view the acquisition of knowledge as merely a means to an end (e.g., passing an examination) and, hence, transitory; and (3) the approach is more suited to contemporary cultural conditions in that it successfully breaks free from outdated binary oppositions, namely the academic versus the vocational and the factual versus the technical which no longer map onto current social and economic reality. The final section of the paper will simply open discussion on whether the approach can be broadened to other disciplines or requires a core curriculum of philosophical modules.

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§1| Bedding philosophy in reality

Among ethicists and teachers of ethical theory it is, to be overtly rhetorical and a little bit disingenuous, implicitly acknowledged that the role of applied ethics and bioethics is of more use in teaching the central doctrines of moral thought than in the actual resolution of issues in contemporary culture, at least as it is practised in most cases.[1] The reasons why applied ethics – discussions of euthanasia, abortion and war, for example – serve this purpose are, for the most part, obvious: the learner feels that there is something at stake, that there is something worth arguing about in a way that they do not when engaging with, say, the veridical versus dispositional theories of pleasure. Central to the degree programme in Philosophical Studies at Newcastle University is an object-centred research programme, personally directed and partly self-assessed by the student which seeks to bed philosophical concepts into real debates and the actual world. Over and above the traditional content and substance of a philosophy degree, learners who engage in an object-centred research project will acquire knowledge that crosses disciplines and takes them beyond their standard, narrow curriculum. Reciprocally, it brings philosophical concepts and skills closer to the non-academic world in much the same way that bioethics has centred many ethical debates through their application of philosophical concepts to real, scientific facts, such as the sentience of animals, the development of embryos or the welfare of peoples. So, for example, engaging in a project centred on the object of the "home" within the territory of "architecture as a cultural phenomenon" would not only furnish deeper understanding of the specific philosophical concepts brought to bear (possibly, "space", "family" and "tradition"), but also lead to an acquisition of knowledge about architecture and cultural practices. Such knowledge outcomes will be set by the learner him or herself in collaboration with the supervisor and stated in both the personal development plan and the project dissertation. The main advantages over traditional theses are that, first, the students' motivation to engage in learning is interest rather than punitively driven; and, second, the relevance of philosophical theory to the real world is demonstrated to the student. The learning objectives, knowledge outcomes and educational rationale of the project module are that students be reflectively aware of and able to apply the core critical skills of philosophy to an empirical, non-philosophical object as well as preparing students to have the confidence to use relevant philosophical concepts and knowledge beyond the academic confines of a degree programme.

The present paper, beyond its being an introduction to the object-centred methodology, wishes to argue for three claims: (1) that the personalised, context-based approach is more successful at both developing and making the student aware of developing specific educational skills (autonomy, independence, critical aptitude, etc.) which are highly desirable and easily transferable; (2) that the student does not view the acquisition of knowledge as merely a means to an end (e.g., passing an examination) and, hence, transitory; and (3) the approach is more suited to contemporary cultural conditions in that it successfully breaks free from outdated binary oppositions, namely the academic versus the vocational and the factual versus the technical which no longer map onto current social and economic reality.

§2| The Project teaching and learning methodology

The teaching of the context-based research module takes place in weekly meetings in groups of maximum ten students, reinforced by one-to-one sessions and substantial supervisor feedback. The assessment of the project is a mixture of self-assessment and continuous assessment, involving both indicative (progress report, first presentation), formative (second presentation, entry for the book of change, personal development plan) and summative (project thesis of 8000 words). Learners are accompanied, in close collaboration with a supervisor,

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[1] I repeat that this opening salvo is merely rhetorical. As a statement it ought to be made conditional to the teaching of applied ethics as a module part of a programme in Philosophy and not as embedded in more vocational or professionally accredited degrees (engineering, biology, medicine) where it serves quite a different purpose. See Myser (2001) for a more rounded discussion.

through phased development: (1) identification and investigation of the object of research; (2) identification of appropriate philosophical concepts methodology; (3) self-assessment and self-development; and finally, (4), the production of the thesis itself.[2]

Some students arrive at the first meeting with very clear cut ideas about what exactly they want to pursue, some arrive with a vague nebulous of interests and some with no ideas whatsoever. The role of the supervisor is to offer encouragement and to use his or her experience to direct the learner away from objects that are inappropriate, either because they will not yield any substantial discussion of worth or because they are too ambitious in their scope. Once the object has been identified and provisionally approved, learners must actively, independently and creatively identify possible sources of information and data outwith the normal comfort zone of the library and the internet (although these will, more than probably, be the starting point). The learner must be encouraged to engage with the 'real' world with the supervisor reminding them that one of the objectives of the project is to demonstrate to the learner – and to give them in turn the ability to demonstrate to others – the relevance and utility of philosophical methods and knowledge outside the degree; to descend from the ivory tower if you will. Through this process, the way in which the object is to be understood – its 'context', 'place' and 'territory' – are to be decided. The supervisor may wish to direct the learner to see how an immediate understanding may well be problematic and urge the student to contrast two different understandings of the same object. These contrasts should bring into sharp relief the immediate nature of our everyday statements and judgements and also the supposed rational basis for them.

Through the narrowing of one's object to a discussion within a specific territory or context, and by empirically researching the 'place' of the object within this context, the appropriate philosophical concepts ought to suggest themselves. Bibliographies and notes should be assembled in the personal development plan and the understanding of the concepts will be developed and revised in conversation with the supervisor and project group. The learner will need to explicitly state how they are going to both investigate his or her project and also state why the philosophical concepts are appropriate and how they are to be applied. In short, he or she will need to, at least in a rudimentary fashion, state the methodological approach taken towards his or her object of research.[3]

When the discussion of the object, context and concepts have reached a high level of theoretical worth, the supervisor will begin prompting members of the project group to begin asking themselves whether it was worth undertaking the research they have done, whether they have developed skills or acquired knowledge that will be of use in the future or with relation to their degree as a whole. Learners are encouraged to reflect on their own development by looking back through their personal development plans. The learner should be independent and active by the stage of thesis writing and group meetings should be wholly led and determined by learner aims and objectives.[4]

§3| Intellectual capital and bankruptcy

It is perhaps odd to use the educational term intellectual capital at a time when, as Hamlet would have put it, the term seems so 'out of joint' with reality. And yet that is perhaps why one finally feels secure enough to use it because it is a term that now has a certain resonance in times when any use of economic concepts even within their own discourse is both inopportune and suspect. Intellectual capital embodies what could be termed the CBI

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[2] I include an illustrative example in the appendix to augment the theoretical description which follows.

[3] Given the technical nature of this phase, the supervisor's role is most intensive here and the student is most dependent.

[4] It should be noted the active role of the learning and the reorientation of the teacher-learner relationship in this process. I do not have time to expand this aspect here, but would imagine an interesting discussion could be framed using the deconstruction of the Enlightenment dichotomy of independent/dependent that MacIntyre (1999) operates.

vision of education that sees Higher Education in thrall to the dominant ideology of our time in that its role is to produce skill-possessing possible employees who arrive at the market place with their knowledge to sell.[5] And yet this vision does at least embody a modicum of truth, what Hegel would call shape of spirit, because it does correctly put tension on the vocational/academic binary opposition at the heart of traditional Higher Education. Traditionally, it was believed that whereas a plumber or an electrician learn a craft and a set of practical of skills, an historian or a grammarian learns facts about the world. Yet, such a division of labour was highly suspect: not only does plumbing require 'facts', but history also requires 'skills'. And, in fact, the humanities disciplines which constituted the original academic enterprise of Renaissance Italy develop and perfect those skills demanded by a mercantile, enlightened economy.[6] (Pring, 2004) Only the response of policy makers was to identify and privilege skills over and above, and at the expense of, the substantial content of these disciplines, that is knowledge, as the aim of education as though truth, understanding and conceptualisation were training for something much more worthwhile, that is the transferable skills required for capital accumulation. The skills agenda was identified as the cohesion of Higher Education with a business culture because graduates would be produced which were useful to society as whole through fulfilling a variety of roles in diverse industries.

The project module in Philosophical Studies is forward-looking because it responds to this culture context in a radical, innovative and agenda-setting manner. The three claims made at the outset of this paper were: (1) personalized, context-based approach is more successful at both developing and making the student aware of developing specific educational skills (autonomy, independence, critical aptitude, etc.) which are highly desirable and easily transferable; (2) learners do not view the acquisition of knowledge as merely a means to an end (e.g., passing an examination) and, hence, transitory; and finally, (3), the approach is more suited to contemporary cultural conditions in that it successfully breaks free from outdated binary oppositions, namely the academic versus the vocational and the factual versus the technical which no longer map onto current social and economic reality. The first claim is a response to the skills agenda set by government and policy makers over the past thirty years, whereas the second and third claims are an attempt for the academic community itself to respond to these agendas in a robust and discipline-affirming manner.

(1) The skills agenda identifies intellectual capital as the possession of transferable, core critical skills desirable to would-be employers. It is no longer about epistemic expertise or possession of 'facts'. The object-centred methodology aims at developing the core critical skills which are already implicit to a philosophical education: independence, autonomy, critical thinking, reflective understanding, evaluative interpretative skills, ability to understand, organize, order and disseminate specialist knowledge. (Maguire, 2007; QAA, 2000) These core skills are all traditionally academic skills, but learners have often only been latently aware of their talents. The reflective nature of the learning process of the Project is aimed at increasing awareness of these skills through the application of philosophical theory to empirical objects: one sees these skills in action as it were, rather than implicitly employed as part of the game of philosophy. One can learn to avoid 'begging the question' by attempting to discredit Hobbes's redefinition of liberty, or one can see it in action in statements about media representations of youth, for example. In the second case, the learner must show where he has encountered a case of begging the question and show that it leads to ungrounded argument. The Project is a means to the development of the "critical being" or rational autonomy of the subject in a reflective rather than an implicit way. (Hanscombe, 2007)

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[5] If HE produces individuals for the business community, why should companies not pay for their 'own' training programmes? Of course they argue that they do: give us productive individuals, we are productive companies and we pay more tax and this tax is what funds your HE academies. One more version of the trickled-down myth of capitalism: the sorts of myth which are fast becoming bankrupt. But this myth held fast for a long time and motivated the deconstruction of the academic-vocational opposition that dominated Higher Education until about the last decade of the twentieth century.

[6] The presence of medicine in the universities rather than the polytechnics is historical evidence that the vocational/academic distinction has always been a smokescreen for a deeper ideological division.

(2) Ask any university student about the content of their A-level syllabus and you will unusually be greeted by a shrug of the shoulders. The aim of acquiring the knowledge was to pass the examination as a stepping-stone to a university place. Similarly, students on degrees where the curriculum content is not in any way career specific (philosophy, history, literature, and so on) view the knowledge as something which they are interested in, but that the way to secure employment is through the grading of the degree and not its content. The knowledge disseminated on these programmes is transitory in nature: what is interesting to the individual will remain, but what is necessary for the completion of studies will pass away. Interest to the students is, in part, a function of relevance as indicated by the success of applied ethics in teaching ethical theory.

The proactive response and the discipline affirming nature of the Project module in Philosophical Studies is that knowledge, and its own worth, are also stressed. The object-centred approach allows a discipline (in this case philosophy) to reaffirm the absolute relevance of what may, at times, appear esoteric and (derogatorily) academic learning. The changing nature of the job market entails that the vast majority of graduates are no longer either specialist possessors of knowledge or skilled craftsmen, but facilitators of knowledge and management systems.

Context-based learning aims to demonstrate the relevance of both philosophical skills and knowledge outwith the academic domain and to also ground philosophical debate in a 'real' territory for students. The ability to bring knowledge from their degree programme to bear upon seemingly alien domains of knowledge is a massive advantage for graduates of the Newcastle Philosophical Studies Programme: many of the students on the programme are able, in response to the perennial interview question "How has your degree prepared you for a career in this sector?", to give a concrete summary of their project research usually geared towards a specific employment niche (education, law, human resources) and the philosophical *knowledge* appropriate to that domain (consequentialism, obligation, virtue ethics, for example), rather than reel of the banal and expected answer which lists the core critical skills of education. The knowledge outcomes of a degree programme regain the centre-stage at the expense of the implicit skill outcomes.

Finally, (3), the skills agenda was motivated by the deconstruction of the academic/vocational opposition and the recognition that an academic education was useful. However, the privileging of the skills agenda over and above – and in some sense separate from – the knowledge outcomes of a degree programme was an erroneous response to the actual reality and our shared contemporary culture. Certain other binary oppositions reinforce the idea that knowledge and skills are different in kind and objects of separate enquiry and dissemination: science versus humanities (what about the ethics of scientific research?), the empirical versus the essayist (the need for research to cohere with public opinion, research in the size of brains for example), and also the independent versus the dependent (learners through a university career are encouraged to move from passive to active and this transition is sought by employers or society as a whole) (Jaros, Deakin-Crick, 2007: 429)

The exact historical moment and its manifold causes of this deconstruction are incidental: the knowledgeable were always needed as an access point when the populace as whole could not read, or when memory of facts was an internal, hereditary tradition, but contemporary culture has made the roles of individuals horizontal rather than hierarchical. Intellectual capital is no longer about epistemic expertise or possession of 'facts' and the correct description of employees in contemporary, post-industrial culture is one of information nodes or elements in a system of code. General Practioners no longer know all the diseases or symptoms, nor are they the only ones who can access the 'canon' of learning, they are flow-chart operators seeking various outcomes (Paracetamol, antibiotics, referral, "there-there") and disseminators of this information in the appropriate register for their public. Intellectual capital is about knowing how to find, organise and communicate interpretations in the proper discourse and at the correct register. The object-centred module in Philosophical Students produces such individuals, yet simultaneously affirms the concepts and ideas of philosophy as a subject as relevant to and central to such organisations and communications of other discourses. Once more, in response to the conditions

of contemporary culture, the Project module is a discipline affirming response rather than relegating the knowledge of philosophy to a means to an end of skills acquisition. The question remains whether such an approach can affirm other disciplines in an equally vibrant way.

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Appendix: illustrative example

For illustrative purposes, let us assume that a learner has an interest in looking more closely at illegal drugs and this interest was sparked by a variety of circumstances: why certain substances are illegal and others are not, why there is such a difference in attitudes to different substances (nicotine, alcohol, cannabis) between generations, why contemporary society is seemingly equivocal in its own attitude to illegal substances, and so on. The supervisor sees possibilities in such an exploration and prompts the learner to ask herself whether experiences of drug taking and religious experiences are similar, why people take drugs, why society may want people to use or not use certain substances, why the individual may want to use them, when the substances were made illegal, why we distinguish in kind between substances, and so on.

The learner seeks information from a variety of sources (the library, government, friends' anecdotes, fictional narratives and so on) until she hits upon a little known fact that there was an attempt to prohibit certain substances to specific classes, especially factory workers. The idea of certain substances being prohibited for the immediate reason of protecting the individual from harm, can be theoretically contrasted to other paternalistic laws (seatbelts) and also to other substances which may cause harm (alcohol, nicotine); or, an historical contrast can be developed between the pre and post legislation periods and to see what timeline the legislation coincided with (the industrial revolution, the era of mass and cheap production of these substances); or a cultural contrast between societies with stricter and those with weaker laws. The supervisor asks her about the sources for her information and whether it can be trusted (is it from a decriminalization lobby group, for example?).

She then makes a connection between economic productivity and drug use and becomes aware that the paternalist justification for the prohibition of certain substances may well be disingenuous. She decides (with the help of her supervisor) that what interests her most is the object drugs within the context of legislation and law. She asks whether legislation exists to protect the individual or to protect the interests of someone else, properly philosophical questions and the concepts of law, welfare and autonomy are identified. The method she intends to use is a rational, empirical enquiry into the justification of law and its empirical grounds.