FROM THE EDITORS
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ARTICLE
Kenneth R. Pike
Model, Scaffold, Inspire: Principles for Bringing Philosophy Online

CALL FOR PAPERS
FROM THE EDITORS

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We are happy to welcome readers to the fall 2020 issue of the APA Newsletter on Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges. This issue features one article on teaching by Kenneth Pike of the Florida Institute of Technology and Glendale Community College.

Pike begins by noting that the value of the philosophy professor has been challenged in the past, but this challenge is particularly acute today. For while the readings we assign and the information we present are undoubtedly useful, we do not represent the only source of such knowledge—libraries and the internet are other sources. If assigning and presenting information is all that we do, we are redundant, and ultimately will be rendered redundant. Pike answers this challenge. Philosophy professors do have value. We do not just profess philosophy (that is, have students gain knowledge from us); we do philosophy. What really makes us valuable is that we “model, scaffold, and inspire” the doing of philosophy. However, Pike notes that the environment in which we teach can variously affect such doing. Interaction online differs from face-to-face interaction. Not only are there obvious barriers to the effectiveness of pre-recorded lectures on Canvas or Blackboard, podcasts on SoundCloud, and of live-streaming on YouTube or Zoom, but also, in contrast to the centuries that philosophers have engaged in face-to-face interactions, online teaching is a nascent medium. It has a lot of catching up to do.

While we have all been forced into online teaching for the time being, due to COVID-19, Pike notes that online teaching is here to stay and we need to adapt. He offers compelling and sometimes surprising advice on what he takes to be best online practices, and offers them along three principles of teaching: modeling, scaffolding, and inspiring. In terms of modeling the doing of philosophy, Pike offers two related, but distinct pieces of advice. To return to the written word in both expressing one’s ideas and responding to the ideas of others is the first recommendation. He speaks of the power of writing to engage students in ways that go beyond mere dialogue. Second, he recommends actively engaging students and critiquing their arguments in open discussion forums: “Online philosophy instructors can perhaps best model doing philosophy by actively engaging their students and critiquing their arguments in open (to the class) forums.” This is controversial advice, however, because it is now common practice to let students discuss among themselves while the instructor merely observes and (sometimes) monitors. In the absence of sufficient empirical evidence one way or the other, such common practice is often justified by the worry that instructors will intimidate students causing them to be less willing to engage. But Pike is unconvinced that instructor involvement in open discussion is inherently self-defeating. Instructor involvement can be detrimental, but it does not need to be. For just as faculty learn how to speak with students in the classroom in ways that invite rather than stymie discussion, they should learn how to write in discussion boards so that it has a similar effect. Direct faculty participation in online discussion is a skill that must be developed, but the benefits are worth it.

Scaffolding refers to structuring the class so that there is progressive and cumulative learning. One assignment builds on the other by connecting older concepts to new ones. The aim here is greater independence in the process of learning. To optimize scaffolding, Pike emphasizes that we must not let the medium of online learning dictate our approach to teaching. For instance, we must resist the temptation in educational software programs to go the “click” route. Using a multiple-choice, true and false quiz for testing reading comprehension is certainly tempting because it can be used over and over again. But it is important to find ways to increase time and engagement with the material rather than to decrease engagement—in other words, the doing of philosophy. Assignments that require writing, whether in essay form and in discussion posts, are therefore crucial.

The final topic Pike discusses is inspiration. What is our unique role as philosophy instructors? Pike answers: to help students think for themselves. What inspires students the most when it comes to thinking for themselves? Instructor involvement is Pike’s answer. But how is this achieved in an online, “virtual” environment where no one is physically present with the other, where students cannot go to office hours extemporaneously just to visit, or chat before and after class? Optional discussions do not work. Again, the answer, Pike argues, is regular instruction interaction, especially in the assigned discussion boards. This calls for “something of a renaissance in written communication.” And Pike sees a real danger if we do not: our redundancy.
Teaching online is something I approach with trepidation. When asked why, I will usually explain that research shows face-to-face instruction is simply more effective—at least in some subjects. This may be partially due to the number of distractions students face even when live-streaming lectures. Like student demographics and enrollment numbers, the seemingly inherent perils of online learning are not up to me, so one way I can serve my students is by making sure they know they are more likely to get a quality education in a classroom than in front of a screen. But I recognize it doesn’t hurt my enthusiasm that the data I’ve seen is comfortably compatible with my own personal preferences. I enjoy face-to-face instruction. When the threat of COVID-19 forced me (and everyone else) to rapidly move my in-person classes online, I was frustrated and disappointed. For those of us who thrive on the time-honored tradition of face-to-face discussion, who are lately called upon to do less of that, I would like to offer a framework that might prove helpful in thinking about how to translate to our virtual classrooms at least some of what we commonly aim to accomplish in person.

Central to my thinking is a distinction and a conviction that will doubtless raise some eyebrows from the epistemologically inclined. The distinction is that there is a substantial difference between learning about philosophy, and doing philosophy. The conviction is that doing philosophy should be our goal as philosophy instructors, and that this will result in greater learning about philosophy. I will not particularly defend either distinction or conviction here. I will acknowledge that educational and epistemological theorizing from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics down to at least Bertrand Russell’s famous “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” does all the heavy philosophical lifting in the background of what follows. There are also similarities in my prescriptions to the well-known medical school pedagogy of “see one, do one, teach one.” Beyond that, I hope it will suffice to admit that what I’m after here is not Truth-seeking in the grand tradition of my intellectual forebears, but only a slightly ad hoc narrative concerning what it is that we, as professional philosophy instructors, have to contribute—what it is that we really do.

Of course, should an administrator attached to purse-strings pose the question, the boilerplate response that we “teach critical thinking” is ready at hand and commonly accepted. This is especially interesting given the popularity of the Witticism that we can lead our students to knowledge, but cannot make them think. The prima facie disconnect can be resolved by pointing out that, while not every student can be induced to cognitive effort, modeling critical thinking gives students something to imitate; scaffolding that thinking provides opportunities for practice; and inspiring students to rise to the occasion is not the sole province of feel-good family movies. These are all things we do, as instructors, to induce our students to do philosophy (and not merely learn about it). Helpful as it can be to know what certain great minds have thought, and when they had those thoughts, and what influences might have inspired their thinking, rare indeed is the student who will retain that information, or to whom it will ever prove of more than trivial importance. I do not wish to gainsay any of the paeans to the humanities or philosophy that have been penned since Aristophanes first put Socrates in The Clouds, but it must be admitted that whatever intrinsic value knowledge about philosophy has to humans generally, most of it will go forever unrealized by the bulk of our pupils. Rather, we model for, scaffold with, and inspire our students in hopes of habituating certain habits of thinking. To bowdlerize Aristotle, especially in community colleges, where students are less likely to major in philosophy or pursue careers in academia, our students do not study philosophy in order to know what philosophy is, but in order to become better people.

Some of the ways we pursue this are the same whether our courses are face-to-face, online, or otherwise. Whether our students read Plato on paper or on a screen makes relatively little difference in itself (particularly given the number who will not do the reading in any event). Rather, empirical findings seem to suggest that insofar as even ostensibly educational “screen time” interferes with learning, it may be because people do not come to their screens with the same learning mindset they bring to more tactile alternatives. For better or worse, most of our students are thoroughly conditioned to recognize classrooms and lecture halls as places of learning, and their electronic screens as places of entertainment. I have sometimes opined that keeping students engaged inside the classroom can feel less like an afternoon at the Academy and more like Saturday night at the Improv. By analogy, even pre-recorded lectures with the tempo of TED talks may fall short of engaging students more accustomed to streaming Netflix, YouTube, or Twitch. There is an understandable temptation, I think, to respond by imitating the market-optimized, attention-grabbing tactics of popular entertainment (and, regrettably, news) media. On one hand, the information we present to our students—the learning about philosophy that must take place—might well be enhanced by engaging celebrities narrating high-production-value presentations. On the other—and it is not popular to say so, but I think it must be said—if we as faculty do not provide pedagogical value beyond what is already provided, gratis, by YouTube, then our communities probably should eliminate our positions and enjoy a property tax reduction at our expense.

In fact, we do provide tremendous value, but it is not particularly in the readings we assign, nor in the information we present—both of which are widely and often freely available to anyone with a library card, much less a smartphone. The value we provide, in other words, is not in those portions of our pedagogy for which online versus face-to-face instruction makes no difference of approach. We provide value by modeling, scaffolding, and inspiring...
the doing of philosophy, in order to develop certain habits of thinking, and these are things that cannot always be done online the same way they are done face-to-face. For example, pre-recorded lectures cannot be interrupted for questions, depriving students of opportunities to participate in the process of working through a challenging problem. This might be alleviated by live-streaming lectures, but then the process of interruption must be sufficiently clear to students that they are comfortable using it. Raising one's hand to speak in a classroom setting is not yet a gesture with a universally established analogue in live-streamed lectures (though at least one software company, Zoom, has implemented a somewhat skeuomorphic icon that can serve the purpose). But innovation of this kind still fails to fill the niche of responding adaptively to facial expressions and body language; how many of us have given the floor to a student who seemed to want to say something, but for whatever reason could not bring themselves to take the affirmative step of actively volunteering?

This is but one example of the many ways in which standard approaches to online education can interfere with the use of pedagogical tools philosophers have been honing for centuries. Having at least partially identified the challenge, is there anything we can do about it? After all, regardless of whether online education is ultimately better than, worse than, or merely different from face-to-face education, it is here to stay, and likely to become even more common in the future. In answer to this question I can only offer my own anecdotal and, inevitably, incomplete advice, in hopes that if we cannot prevent all the harm done by sending academia into digital diaspora, we can at least mitigate it along the lines of the value we, as philosophy faculty, furnish.

**Modeling:** Have you ever attempted to imitate a linguistic dialect or accent different from your own habitual speech patterns? There are a variety of contexts in which this might be done (most notably, in the context of "code switching," which has accrued a vast and fascinating body of related academic literature I will not resort to here), but psychological research suggests that we might have very good reason to mimic the accented speech of others: it improves our ability to understand them. Imitation is the mother of learning and comprehension, and analytically, there can be no imitation without a model. Whatever our students are to learn, be that "critical thinking" or "philosophy" or otherwise, the quality of their education will depend in part on the quality of their model. Inside a classroom, our own meta-model is, traditionally, Socrates; the Socratic method of raising questions and engaging in dialogue to draw out hidden assumptions has been the gold standard of academic education since before there was an Academy. As philosophy instructors, we model asking questions by posing them to our students, and we model answering questions by responding to theirs. By interpreting their questions charitably, we model charity. By answering their questions thoughtfully, we model careful thought. The material we assign them for class preparation is important, but primarily in the context of facilitating the discussion that follows.

Inside a classroom, dialoguing follows naturally from the medium of exchange. College students almost always arrive with at least some grasp of how to participate in a class discussion, even if they prefer to avoid it when they can. Online education, in my experience, tends to shift emphasis away from discussion, toward focus on the presentation and memorization of certain facts. This is often a very important part of education, but one reason online education tends to move this direction, I suspect, is that it is easy to automate. If I write a comprehensive syllabus, record sixteen weekly lectures, write sixteen weekly quizzes and a couple of exams with radio-buttoned answers, not only can I recycle my course next semester with minimal effort, I can "teach" a theoretically infinite number of students at any time. Indeed, my employer may well wonder why they should continue to pay me, if I no longer do any work! Intellectual property and the automation of education are topics that well exceed the scope of this essay, but are related in the sense that the norms of online education tend to obscure the unique value of instructors. As Neil Postman observes in his prophetic Amusing Ourselves to Death, What is peculiar about the interpositions of media is that their role in directing what we will see or know is so rarely noticed. A person who reads a book or who watches television or who glances at his watch is not usually interested in how his mind is organized and controlled by these events, still less in what idea of the world is suggested by a book, television, or a watch.

The metaphor of the video-screen is consumption. Students cannot challenge a pre-recorded lecture; they may accept or reject what is offered, but they cannot interrupt for clarification or synthesis. Live-streaming a lecture and putting participants on camera ostensibly overcomes this hurdle, but how quickly did the first rule of Zoom Club—*mute your microphone*—percolate through our COVID response channels? The idea that instructors exist to *present information* dominates the idea of online education, even though that has never been our primary value. The presentation of information is not what we want to model. What we want is to show our students how to think with a philosophical accent. We accept the prevailing metaphor at our own vocational peril.

If we are to avoid this peril, we must think about what it means to model *doing philosophy*. I see at least two ways to do this while accommodating demand for online education. The first is simply to find ways, by hook or by crook, to reinvigorate the Socratic method for the age of virtual consumption. Pre-recorded lectures, if they are used at all, should not be the center of our pedagogy. Live-streamed lectures, too, must be handled with care; "classroom management" must persist even when there is no longer a classroom. Depending on class sizes, demographics, and available technology, some hurdles to encouraging dialogue may prove insurmountable. At these points it must be remembered that *doing philosophy* is not an activity that has been limited to the Socratic method since Plato put stylus to wax. Philosophical writing, both to express our own ideas and to respond to the ideas of others, is equally ancient, and arguably more important. Historically, community college instructors have not been called upon to write very much, but if we are going to model philosophy for our students outside a classroom
setting, a return to focus on the written word may be our best approach.

Discussion boards are already routinely included in online education, but the common standard is for students to discuss matters amongst themselves. I suspect this is insufficient. Online philosophy instructors can perhaps best model doing philosophy by actively engaging their students and critiquing their arguments in open (to the class) forums. This may be especially uncomfortable for some, given the number of students who may have more experience than their instructors with online forum posts as a medium of exchange, but if ever there was a time to adapt—we are living in it. It might also be objected that instructor participation in discussion boards actually hampers learning, for example, if the instructor’s perceived authority intimidates students or otherwise chills their willingness to express themselves. Empirical research into this particular difficulty appears to be ongoing, but it may be worth noting that we already deal with analogous challenges inside the classroom. As with speaking, writing in a way that invites, rather than stymies, further discussion is a skill that requires practice. Faculty who lack experience with polite, professional, productive online discussion may be well-advised to seek out quality forums to hone their abilities.

Scaffolding: Naturally, having a model to imitate is only the first step to learning; eventually our students must actually do the imitating. This is another area where the on-screen model of education-as-consumption can interfere with philosophical training. As with the process of asking and answering questions, encouraging students to practice what they have learned is something the classroom setting often facilitates. This is less true of the enormous lecture halls beloved of some universities, but in community colleges where courses are ordinarily kept to a manageable size, small group discussions are easily arranged, as are individual research presentations. Of course, it would be a little strange, and likely totally ineffective, to ask students to focus on whatever seems philosophically interesting to them at the moment, so these approaches to having our students do philosophy commonly come with a sort of “scaffolding.” We give students a topic and ask them to present their experiences in various ways. In theory this is all possible with live-streaming technology, but arranging the timing of such events is a logistical nightmare given a small number of students, and with a large number of students there are simply not enough waking hours in a day to give them each adequate attention.

Here the typically smaller class sizes offered by community colleges put them at a distinct advantage over universities cramming hundreds of students into a single section. The medium of online education encourages questions that can be answered with a mouse click—or better yet, a touchscreen. In the past few years I have had a growing number of students try to do all their coursework on a smartphone because they did not have easy access to a larger screen, much less one with a keyboard. Testing our students’ knowledge of historical facts is good pedagogy and should absolutely be done, but clicking responses is not, I submit, doing philosophy. We must create opportunities for our students to think carefully about problems and respond thoughtfully to them, even though this may present interesting challenges for those who attempt to pursue their education through a handheld device. Again, I suspect that discussion forums should play a central role, and term paper assignments remain as important as ever. Guided individual and group presentations can also continue to play a role—and these might be pre-recorded by students and shared to the class, “flipping” (if I may steal and revise a popular pedagogical term for my own use) the model where faculty make videos of themselves while their students remain faceless. While technology inhibits some traditional forms of modeling, it may ultimately enhance opportunities for scaffolding by giving students more ways to respond thoughtfully to interesting questions. But realizing these enhancements requires that we successfully resist the “click culture” educational software platforms like Canvas and Blackboard tend to channel us toward. If we want our students to learn philosophy, they must do the work of philosophy. Most of them live in a world that actively discourages this and gives them as little time or opportunity as possible to think carefully about anything. We can give them those opportunities, but only by resisting the temptation to let the medium of online education govern our approach.

Inspiring: Having modeled philosophy to our students and erected scaffolding within which they might imitate us, the last step is not up to us. In the end, our students must still choose to do the work. They must now, in many cases, make this choice while sitting at home, in front of a screen that is much better at giving them hits of serotonin than it is at engaging their reasoning abilities. This is discouraging, but it is also an opportunity.

Once or twice a year I hear from students expressing gratitude for how much my class changed their life for the better. Early in my career, I found this somewhat alarming; to have the course of one’s life changed by an introductory philosophy course, of all things, seemed like evidence, at best, of catastrophic failure in our public education system! But a certain mentor of mine pointed out that, for most people, an opportunity to spend several weeks thinking about big, important, meaningful questions, then talking them over with someone who has dedicated years of their life to the love of wisdom, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Our students are surrounded every day by influences telling them what to think; our unique undertaking is to help them think for themselves. Not every student needs this particular lesson, but many do. Pre-recorded lectures and radio-button exams are no help here. Reading and writing are some help, and should be emphasized. But it is instructor involvement, first and foremost, that inspires students to take the hand they’ve been extended. A student who stays after class to ask extra questions, or visits office hours “just to talk,” cannot do these things online. There are no easy analogies; I have tried, for example, providing “optional discussion” threads in my online courses, but these almost always go entirely unused. I have had a few email conversations with particularly dedicated students, but young people seem less inclined than my generation to rely on email for thoughtful conversation. One thing that does seem to inspire my students is my actively
participating in their assigned discussion boards. Regular instructor interaction might seem like a large investment of time for little obvious payoff, but in the end it is the thing that distinguishes our courses from a YouTube lecture series. It is our attention, more than anything, that inspires our students to do the work, to use the scaffolding, to imitate what we model.

Or so it seems to me. On this particular point I have no empirical literature! I personally find it much easier to be inspiring in a classroom, where I can respond immediately and adaptively to shifting moods and topics of conversation. Those brilliant moments when students stop talking to me and start talking to each other, start really doing philosophy together, I live to create. Replicating those moments online seems, to me, far more challenging—but no less worth the effort. In practical terms, I think this will require something of a renaissance in written communication; if we cannot be Socrates, we must be Plato. If philosophy instructors follow the pedagogical trend of pre-recorded lectures and click-friendly exams, we will make ourselves entirely redundant. Even more interactive approaches, like live-streamed lectures, must be approached with an eye toward modeling our particular expertise, providing students with opportunities to imitate us, and inspiring them to really engage the course materials. This is the essential work of philosophical instruction, the portion that cannot be streamed lectures, must be approached with an eye toward modeling our particular expertise, providing students with opportunities to imitate us, and inspiring them to really engage the course materials. This is the essential work of philosophical instruction, the portion that cannot be automated or outsourced. The present pandemic means that many of us must learn how to interact with our students in new or sub-optimal ways, but we are equal to the task. So long as we bear in mind that those interactions, not the content of course material, constitute the value we offer our students to do the work, to use the scaﬀolding, to imitate what we model.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA committee for philosophy in two-year colleges invites papers for inclusion in the spring 2021 issue of the APA Newsletter on Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges.

Papers should be devoted to topics of particular interest to two-year and community college faculty, and graduate students who are considering a two-year or community college career path. These include but should not be construed as limited to the following: lower division teaching pedagogy; text and textbook selections including the use of open-access resources; cross-disciplinary initiatives; student demographics and advising; student learning evaluation; program evaluation and program growth initiatives; faculty credentialing and hiring, including concerns for women and minorities, and the status of adjunct faculty; faculty scholarship opportunities; issues dealing with program administration; and topics of general philosophical interest. Co-authored papers are welcome.

Submission Deadline: December 1, 2020

All submissions should be sent electronically to the co-editor of the Newsletter, Aaron Champene, at achampene@stlcc.edu. Papers should be attached as Word documents.

All paper submissions should adhere to the following guidelines:

• Papers should be in the range of 1,500 to 3,000 words, including endnotes. Exceptional papers that fall outside this range may be considered, though this is not guaranteed.

• Papers should be prepared for anonymous review. Papers should contain nothing that identifies either the author(s) or her/his/their institution, including any such references in the endnotes. A separate page with the author’s name, paper title, and full mailing address should also be submitted.

• Authors are advised to read the APA publishing guidelines available on the APA website. Please pay close attention to all APA formatting restrictions.

All papers will undergo anonymous review and evaluation by an editorial committee composed of current and/or past Two-Year College Committee members. This committee will report its findings to the co-editors of the Newsletter, and the co-editors will make all publishing decisions based on those anonymously refereed results.

NOTES


8. One tendency in this literature has been to call for the development of “clear standards” for optimal instructor participation. See, for example, B. Jean Mandernach, R. M. Gonzales, and Amanda L. Garrett, “An Examination of Online Instructor Presence via Threaded Discussion Participation,” MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching 2, no. 4 (2006): 248–60. My concern with this literature is that it may be a way of sinking further into the online metaphor, where every interaction is aggregated for analysis. The problem is that measures of this kind tend to be transformed by administrative forces into targets, rendering them vulnerable to what is sometimes called “Goodhart’s law”—that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

All papers will undergo anonymous review and evaluation by an editorial committee composed of current and/or past Two-Year College Committee members. This committee will report its findings to the co-editors of the Newsletter, and the co-editors will make all publishing decisions based on those anonymously refereed results.