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FROM THE EDITOR

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ARTICLE

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Teaching Literacies in the Community College Classroom: What's the Role of the Philosophy Professor?

CALL FOR PAPERS

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SAHAR JOAKIM RESCH, EDITOR

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FROM THE EDITOR

Sahar Joakim Resch
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At two-year colleges, philosophy classes are unique places of intellectual collision. It is a space where the abstract meets the urgent, and where students from vastly different socio-economic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds gather to engage with the "big questions." Some students enrolled because they thought it was an easy "A" to transfer, and others are there to spend all of your office hours talking about one paragraph from the reading.

As any seasoned community college professor knows, the bridge between a student's lived experience and the rigorous demands of a philosophical text is often built from the fragile materials of literacy. All philosophy professors are dealing with their students being able to read and retain less, but at the two-year, we have additional issues with literacy.

A real question I have actually asked my chair: **How do I teach this student Plato's *Republic* when the student can hardly read English?**

In this issue, we are invited to reflect on a fundamental, yet often overlooked, dimension of our pedagogical mission: the nature of literacy itself. The featured article, "Teaching Literacies in the Community College Classroom: What's the Role of the Philosophy Professor?" challenges us to reconsider our roles not merely as purveyors of philosophical content, but as architects of the very cognitive tools required to access that content.

As you prepare to engage with this reflection, I invite you to consider several philosophical and pedagogical questions:

Is literacy a prerequisite or a product of philosophical inquiry? We often treat reading and writing as the "entry fee" for the philosophy classroom. But if, as the author suggests, literacy is a "cultural-linguistic technology" that fundamentally shifts how we interface with the world, should the philosophy classroom be a place where that technology is explicitly taught?

I for one have no idea how to teach someone to read. Yet students are in my philosophy classes who are unable to read English beyond basic sentences. What *is* our job?

If we view philosophy as the art of clear thinking, **can that thinking occur independently of the written word, or is the "slow, deliberate thinking" of the long-form paper essential to the philosophical life?**

Wonder, also, about how AI is changing this conversation about literacy. The author expresses skepticism toward the term "AI Literacy," fearing it equates prompting a machine with the deep cognitive work of original composition. As educators, we must ask, **Is AI a tool that can ethically offload menial cognitive tasks to free us for higher-order reflection, or is the organizing of a messy thought actually where the learning happens?**

The article to follow does not offer easy answers, but it offers something better: a mirror. It asks us to look at our own practices, our own assumptions about what is "natural" in learning, and our own willingness to adapt to a post-literate era.

Reading it, I found it an inspiring call to view the current challenges of teaching philosophy at the two-year college not as obstacles to be avoided, but as a fantastic pedagogical opportunity to rediscover why we teach philosophy in the first place.

I hope this issue serves as a catalyst for your own reflections on what it means to teach, to read, and to think in the contemporary community college classroom.

ARTICLE

Teaching Literacies in the Community College Classroom: What's the Role of the Philosophy Professor?

Jenelle Salisbury
DELTA COLLEGE

I have been thinking a lot about literacy: its role in our cognitive economy, different types of literacies, and the impact of varying literacy rates on teaching and learning.[1] This is an issue that the community college professor faces directly. Our students' literacy skills may vary considerably from student to student. This variance is not inherently a bad thing. It is good that our context allows us to teach students with a vast range of skills and prior knowledge sets. But it does pose a teaching challenge, since students in the same classroom may differ dramatically in their

reading comprehension abilities and in their ability to articulate thoughts in writing.[2]

Here, I'd like to reflect on three main aspects of literacy: literacy in general, disciplinary literacy in philosophy, and, finally, the idea of "AI Literacy." Ultimately, I think we should be more explicit about teaching our students all of these skills, though I push back at the terminology for the latter (I don't think skills using AI should be thought of as a kind of literacy). I also reflect on the idea that perhaps we should find ways to personalize our courses to our students' individual contexts and preparedness levels, since there is more than one way to level up one's philosophical understanding.

LITERACY IN GENERAL

First, consider the notion of literacy itself, i.e., the ability to read and write. Of course, beyond the simple "literate/illiterate" binary, there are degrees of literacy skills. One's adeptness at encoding and decoding the written word can admit of variances in the amount of complexity, speed, nuance, etc. that one is able to understand and communicate.

Literacy is incontrovertibly important.[3] Like the acquisition of language itself, the cognitive onboarding of writing and reading seems to shift the way that we as cognizers interface with our world. I think of it as a kind of cultural-linguistic technology. In our evolutionary history as humans, the establishment of a coded system for communicating meaning marked a drastic leap.

Despite the automaticity of reading itself, or at least the phenomenology of automaticity, gaining literacy is anything but. According to Stanislas Dehaene, while there are some activities that we learn "naturally," like walking and talking, reading is not like this.[4] He argues that for the English language, at least two years of explicit instruction is typically required. He also notes that many of the neural processes responsible for reading take place with a high processing speed, but that learners require very slow and deliberate instruction, even on things that feel "automatic" to the experienced reader.

It is important for us to think about what our students' literacy backgrounds/skills are so that we can better meet them where they are. Generally, I tend to favor a push toward making the implicit explicit in our teaching, and this is no exception. For example, it might be worth sometimes slowing down on phonemes when we are introducing brand new vocabulary items. Students might benefit from vocabulary reference sheets including pronunciation guides when we assign difficult readings.

These strategies, though, seem to only skim the surface of what the student of the future may require for optimal learning. The so-called "literacy crisis" may affect instruction at every level, requiring us to rethink what learning looks like (potentially in a "postliterate" era).[5] I do not know what these changes look like, or if we should consider ourselves obligated to make them at all. One strategy is to rethink what "doing philosophy" can look like, outside the bounds of the traditional term paper.[6]

DISCIPLINARY LITERACY

Disciplinary literacy refers to the skills required for reading and writing the texts produced within a specific academic discipline.[7] If there is a way of reading and writing specific to our discipline, what is that way, and how should we think about imparting these norms to our students?

We may already teach disciplinary literacy to our students in our own classes, whether by that name or another (e.g., if you have a unit on "how to read philosophy"). If we do not, I think that we should. At the very least, it is a useful exercise to reflect on the methodologies of our discipline, such that we can in general communicate these methodologies to our students.

Many of the disciplinary literacy skills in philosophy may feel like second nature to those of us drawn to this field—of course we are reading to find the main point, making inferences, determining the structure of the argument and sub-arguments, distinguishing the author's view from views merely *put forward* for consideration, anticipating counterexamples to any definitions proposed, mapping out dialectical fissures during any literature review, and other things we do (consciously or not) as we engage in active reading. But none of these disciplinary strategies are likely to come naturally to our students. If we are not explicit about what it is that we are doing when we read a philosophical text, our students are unlikely to be able to make the most of their reading time.

I personally was hesitant to incorporate explicit reading instruction to my students, because I wanted them to come at a text by *their own* lights. Even if their interpretation differed wildly from my own, I thought it could be pedagogically (even philosophically) productive to dig into that. But I have come around. Of course, I still want my students to come at a text from their own perspective and interpret it by their own lights, but I now think teaching them disciplinary literacy skills can actually better empower them to do so.

One concrete strategy to teach disciplinary literacy is a "think aloud" exercise, in which an expert in the given discipline reads an excerpt of a disciplinary text to a live classroom or video recording. Sahar Joakim Resch, the editor of this volume, references a similar strategy when she talks about reading aloud.[8] In the think aloud, one doesn't just read the text on the page, but one narrates what one's inner monologue would be doing while reading this text. This is useful as an exercise even privately, because you may notice that externalizing your inner monologue causes you to slow down and realize the many moves that you are making even between sentences.

I was hesitant to do this exercise for my students initially, partly from uncertainty—is my own "way" of reading philosophy really going to help my students learn disciplinary literacy, since my own way is *my way*, not some kind of standard all the philosophers have gotten together and agreed upon? In our discipline, a think aloud may look wildly different from expert to expert. But that's okay: it allows a student to observe not the specific *thoughts* they should have about a text, but *how* they should approach

that text, and how our own inner voice is actively engaged with a text as we read it.

It also probably helps them to see us *struggle* through a text. I've always thought that the struggle of reading and writing philosophy is part of the point. Not that things should be needlessly incomprehensible, but that a lot of the time philosophers are challenging really fundamental ideas that take mental work to unravel in my own head. When I make my students read Kant in my ethics courses, they always complain; they say it gives them a headache. I tell them it's like the gym for their brains—it might be hard, but the hard is *for* something, and you're getting stronger.[9] Seeing this play out with me in real-time as I externalize the many questions I might have about an excerpt helps them to see the value of process over product, too, I hope.

AI "LITERACY"

It is exhausting reading papers written by GenAI, and it is demoralizing when it feels there is nothing to be done, particularly when it cannot be proven. Is the take-home paper gone forever? How are we to teach the kind of slow, deliberate thinking the long-form paper was designed to encourage? What's the best overall strategy—are we right to ban AI outright, or should we allow, even encourage, it?

These questions are important and there is so much great work on the topic. In the present reflection, I wanted to focus specifically on the push in some circles about how "AI Literacy" is so important to employers and should be taught in all classrooms. It is likely true that employers care about having employees that know how to use AI tools well, and I also agree with the intuition that part of our role as community college instructors *does* involve helping to prepare students for the workforce (this might be controversial). So where does that leave us?

First, I do not like the term "AI Literacy" itself. I do not like it because it makes it sound like skills with using AI are important in the same way that literacy skills *themselves* are important.[10] It makes it sound like knowing how to prompt an AI and interpret the results is in any way comparable to knowing how to communicate ideas in writing. It is jarring to hear the comparison when the reality *seems* to be that AI is being used to erode the development of actual literacy before our eyes. Rather than using it as a tool to enhance one's knowledge and level-up one's own thinking, it's being used to *replace* learning, writing, and even thinking. It is grave, and I do not want to pretend that it is not.

Regardless of whether you call it a form of "literacy," though, competency with AI tools is a skill that is being integrated in college classrooms across disciplines. Does it have a place in philosophy? My first instinct is to resist. Like reliance on Google Maps might erode your navigational abilities, reliance on AI could have similar effects on more global cognitive abilities, and while I cannot stop the tide of increasing student usage, I do not want to encourage it. I think most agree that it should never be used to replace one's own thinking, but there is disagreement about where the line is between replacement and enhancement. Some would argue that it's great to be able to offload menial cognitive tasks to free one's time for the important work. As teachers who task ourselves with training our students to think clearly and critically, we may have to contend with a future where students are bringing AI into their cognitive feedback loop. Teaching students how to think better could involve sometimes teaching them to use the tools at their disposal more critically, rather than not at all. And ultimately, though unpleasant, it's a fantastic pedagogical opportunity to exist during this time. It is forcing us to think about what the goals of our courses are, really, about how we are motivating students to align with these goals, and about how we are measuring their success at achieving them.

CLOSING

Ultimately, in the spirit of Joakim Resch's imperative to reinvent the teaching wheel, my reflections on literacy are leaving me with some distinct andragogical questions.

Are literacy skills a prerequisite for learning and doing good philosophy? Is there anything we can incorporate into our teaching that doesn't presuppose them? Can we devise teaching methods that work regardless of one's ability to digest a philosophical article? What practices can we onboard that help to improve one's ability to do so to empower our students as knowers?[11]

How can we adopt these strategies in ways that do not leave our high-performing students bored or unmotivated? Given the nature of our discipline and the vastly different starting points of our students, does it always make sense to have a consistent grading structure where student A and student B have the exact same requirements for a passing grade? I may have different ideas about what excellence, growth, and "success" in my class means for different students based on their starting points—could this be reflected in my grading metrics, or would that be unfair?

Is it possible that we need to redefine what success should look like in our classes, or at least how we measure it? I at least know in the abstract what I want my students to get out of my classes. It is only partly about content knowledge. Yes, in my ethics courses, I care that you understand the moral theories, I care that you learn how to dissect a moral argument and that you understand the arguments we have covered. But on a deeper level? I want you to leave challenged. I want you to integrate something new into your interface with the world and with other people. I want you to reconsider something that you have always taken at face value. I do want you to understand Kant—but the level of depth at which I want you to understand him actually might depend on *you*—your starting point, your initial moral intuitions, your specific background and prior knowledge.

How can I reflect my actual goals for my students in my grading practices? How can I adapt my pedagogical strategies to challenge my students to articulate and critically evaluate their own perspectives, given the variance in what their literacy backstory might look like?

NOTES

1. National Literary Institute, "2024–2025 Literacy Statistics." According to the National Literacy Institute, in 2024, 21 percent of US

adults were illiterate, and 54 percent have a literacy rate below the sixth-grade level.

2. A colleague in the English department, Angela Trabalka, is responsible for sparking my recent interest in literacies.

3. I might be able to imagine someone asserting some kind of anti-writing position. Encoding thoughts into language already often seems to miss something and, further, writing them down permanentizes them as if etched in stone. It removes the context of a lived moment from the meanings of words and sentences. Et cetera, et cetera—but I do not think anyone in 2026 would seriously argue that it is not an advantage to know how to read and write, and to be able to do it well.

4. Dehaene, "Massive Impact of Literacy."

5. Horowitch, "End of Reading." *The Atlantic*.

6. Scott, "Creativity and Inclusivity."

7. Goldman et al., "Disciplinary Literacies"; McHardy et al., "What Strategies"; Hynd-Shanahan, "What Does It Take?"

8. Joakim Resch, "Reimagining Philosophy Education," 2.

9. I am questioning this, now, as I type this for an audience of other community college professors—maybe this is not the best metaphor after all. Maybe things don't *have* to be hard to be philosophically productive.

10. Some prefer the term "critical AI Literacy," which I think is better. See, e.g., Roe et al., "Reflecting Reality."

11. See, for example, Rainey and Morales, "Students Are… The Knowers."

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA committee for philosophy in two-year colleges invites papers for inclusion in the spring 2027 issue of the *APA Studies 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, 2026

All submissions should be sent electronically to the editor, Sahar Joakim Resch, at sjoakim@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 *APA Studies* editor(s), and the editor(s) will make all publishing decisions based on those anonymously refereed results.