

Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges



FALL 2017

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges

THOMAS URBAN, EDITOR

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FROM THE EDITOR

Thomas Urban

RETIRED PROFESSOR, HOUSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

When this newsletter was introduced in fall 2016, I stressed that we would not adhere to any single theme or topic. The current issue continues to affirm that composition, generally. The current issue includes two articles that deal with the character of many contemporary college students, from their presenting as “wild blueberries” to simply being “students who don’t give a damn!” Another suggests an alternative grading technique, designed to encourage greater student engagement in the learning process, particularly as it involves the study of philosophy. Our fourth article that follows introduces an idea for the establishment of a summer institute for two-year and community college philosophy teachers. The author, Richard Legum, is chair of the APA Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges Committee, and member of the philosophy faculty of Kingsborough College (CUNY), Brooklyn, NY. While other philosophy-specific summer programs exist for faculty development, none bring focus to the challenges of teaching philosophy in the two-year or community college setting. Unfortunately, faculty development at most community colleges is limited to learning the latest innovations in technology and teaching methods.

Lastly, I would like to encourage all to review our CFP that appears at the end of this newsletter, and to give serious thought to writing something you believe will be helpful to colleagues in carrying out their responsibilities. Keep in mind too that we are philosophy’s strongest advocates at a time when all disciplines in the arts and humanities are threatened. Articles that highlight how best to advance that advocacy in the community college environment are especially welcome.

ARTICLES

Blueberry Madness

Kristen Zbikowski

HIBBING COMMUNITY COLLEGE, MINNESOTA

How is a college student like a blueberry? The provost at Hibbing Community College compared college students and blueberries during a beginning-of-the-year address to staff and faculty two years ago.¹ That comparison stayed

with me because I am subject to yearly bouts of “blueberry madness.”

This year the symptoms set in a little early. Usually, I do not have the compulsion to scout for blueberries, monitor their development, and then, finally, pick until I have two gallons or am worn out, until July. But this year, after what seemed a very long winter, I found myself out in the woods in early May checking for bushes and blooms.

Picking the wild blueberries of Northern Minnesota can be quite a task. Unless it is a very good year, one may have to cover quite a lot of ground to get a full bucket. The berries are often small, and the bushes are usually low to the ground. There are always mosquitoes, ticks, heat and humidity, and the occasional bear or skunk to contend with.

Friends point out that all this effort and suffering is unnecessary. One could go to a blueberry farm and pick lovely, nickel-sized berries from shoulder height bushes. They are well watered and tended, so are generally sweet and uniform. They also don’t take as much time and preparation to make into pies, jam, or bread. Why do it?

This is where the comparison to college students comes in. There have been times when well-meaning colleagues have asked me when I am going to apply for a “real” teaching job at a university. They tell me that the student quality is better because the admission requirements are higher. The students are more prepared and understand the academic processes. University positions are also more prestigious.

Like wild blueberries, the community college student population is very diverse. While wild blueberries may be small, spicy, silvery, tart or very sweet, single-os, or packed closely on the vine, the diversity of community college students is even greater. There are the canny students, right out of high school, who are looking to save money by finishing their first two years at a community college. There are “seniors” who are auditing courses to expand their horizons. There are new students who have been in the workforce for twenty years and are now in need of re-education. There are many students from other countries who have come to the United States for a U.S. education. There are veterans, fresh from military service, making the sometimes difficult transition back to civilian life.

Many students do not yet know what they want, only that they want a better life. Some students struggle with poverty, mental illness, family responsibilities, and the burden

of working one or two jobs while taking classes. It is not unknown for my students to battle with cancer, increase their families, struggle in the criminal justice system, or be confronted with hunger during their college career.

This vast student diversity gives teaching an extra challenge. One never knows what the overall class readiness level will be, and teaching to all requires much effort and attention. One cannot take student technical skills or even internet access for granted. One must be alert for the extra opportunities to help clear non-academic obstacles from the students' path.

Why spend all the extra time and effort? Like the wild blueberries, it's all about the final jam. When I add all the varieties and flavors of the wild blueberries together, the result is worth the effort. The jam or pies from these varied berries has a wonderful, complex, and ever new flavor. The aftertaste lingers pleasantly.

Once my classes of students are comfortable with each other, their wide diversity begins to pay off. As we work through material, we benefit from the different perspectives and life experiences that each student brings to the class. The discussions take on surprising and interesting turns. Philosophy leaps off the page and becomes personal. The final "jam" is rich, nuanced, and memorable.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Michal Raich for the metaphor of community college students and blueberries that sparked this essay.

Students Who Don't Give a Damn

Marc Bobro

SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE

How does your ego handle the fact that some people really don't give a damn about your lifetime academic pursuit?

When I was a graduate student in philosophy at King's College London in 1990, some undergraduate students complained to me in confidence that if their philosophy professors discovered that they weren't interested in becoming professional philosophers—these students were, in fact, interested only in obtaining a B.A., in whatever discipline—then they would be promptly failed. They claimed that a student had already been failed for this very reason. Hailing from the U.S., where many students go to college simply to get a bachelor's, and American professors generally don't fail them for this reason, I was a bit shocked. One explanation is straightforward: the percentage of British students who attend college is much lower than in the U.S., so those who go to college are expected to take their chosen program of study very seriously. Another explanation is that if an American professor did such a thing, she or he would be fired. At any rate, the result is that I, as a professor in the U.S., and at a two-year college no less, get many students who are really not interested in my chosen discipline. Moreover, I can't just fail the apathetic ones.

Some students, however, just don't "give a damn" at all about philosophy. When I encounter such a student, I typically react in one of three very different ways: (a) with sadness, (b) with indifference, or (c) with frustration. Which reaction I have depends largely on *why* the student doesn't give a damn. Let's address reaction (a) first: *sadness*. Philosophy, at least initially, makes many students uncomfortable, especially students who have never questioned, or were not allowed to question, authority figures, such as parents and elders, about reality, religion, ethics, free will, and the like. At a Catholic college where I used to teach, I asked several classes about whether their parents or elders allowed them to question them on such matters. Very few students said yes. I believe that in one particular class only one student said yes, and to this day I remember his full name. (For what it's worth, he's now a Catholic priest.) The response at this college was particularly extreme, but on my understanding of and my experience in American education, generally, students are molded to question their teachers as little as possible, to listen and take good notes instead of engaging with teachers and peers, and, of course, to do well on standardized tests. Very little philosophy is offered, and very little philosophizing goes on, especially before college. One college roommate I had thought Plato was still alive. American education, by and large, is a system of inculcation rather than a pathway to satisfy a student's curiosity and interests. As a result, American students have little understanding of what philosophers do. So the fact that almost all students at this college were raised Catholic is at best a partial explanation of the response I received. At any rate, it's difficult to begin to philosophize if you've never experienced it, much less done it. And because such students don't have a clue about philosophy, it's not surprising that they also don't give a damn about my discipline.

In cases where a student has no clue about what I do, my reaction is usually one of sadness. For this cluelessness means that the student has lived seventeen years or more of their life with no real exposure to philosophy, all the while going to school. Education is mandatory in the U.S.; if someone aged five to seventeen is not going to a public or a private school, she or he had better be homeschooled. By the time they reach college, students are exposed to mathematics, literature, history, politics, religion, geography, biology, physics, chemistry, sociology, theater, art, and music. Given our obsession with earthquakes in California, students here also learn about geology. But for the most part students have never heard of Descartes. Descartes is a national hero in France; all children know of him. Who in the U.S. knows of our own philosophers, such as William James or John Rawls? For the purposes of clarification, I am *not* insisting that philosophy be compulsory. Rather, I am lamenting the fact that while so many other subjects *are* required, philosophy isn't included on that list.

Let's now look at (b): *indifference*. As a student, isn't it great to have a teacher who is passionate about her or his chosen discipline? I'm passionate about mine. But it is a different matter entirely when a teacher desires every student in her or his class to share in this passion. "Isn't math the greatest?!" Perhaps it is, but let's be honest. Math isn't for

everyone. Nor is philosophy. One's lifetime pursuit is not for everyone, nor should it be. To put this point another way, there's some truth to Plato's "noble lie" or "magnificent myth" of the metals. Socrates says, "All of you in the city are certainly brothers," we shall say to them in telling the tale [of the metals], "but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honored; in auxiliaries, silver; iron in the farmers and bronze in the other craftsmen."

Believing in this myth, Socrates predicts, "would have a good effect, making people more inclined to care for the State and one another." Plato himself may or may not have taken this "magnificent myth" as truth; nonetheless, the good or harmony of his Republic depends on its citizens engaging in different roles. In other words, the ideal State is a socially stratified one, and most certainly *not* one where everyone is engaged in philosophy.

So when a student understands the discipline of philosophy in a basic way, and has perhaps even taken prior classes in philosophy, but finds little that is galvanizing about it or personally useful, I tend to shrug my shoulders and think, "whatever." In this case, my reaction, or lack thereof, is one of apathy. Again, my lifetime pursuit is not for everyone. Who's going to fix my broken leg? The only exception is when it's clear to me that a student has a particular penchant and/or affinity for philosophizing and has not yet recognized it as such. Some students believe *mistakenly* that philosophy is not their passion.

Finally, let's consider reaction (c): *frustration*. Some students don't give a damn about philosophy because they have been exposed to philosophy, or what they take to be philosophy, and have concluded that philosophy isn't worth giving a damn about. There are a number of reasons why students join my class with such a view. Sometimes philosophy is required. For instance, all students at many Catholic colleges have to take three philosophy classes. Sometimes, albeit rarely, students take a class in order to challenge the professor. This isn't so much a problem in philosophy because not many students know about philosophy prior to college. But in some departments, such as political science, this is a serious problem. Conservative students will, on occasion, take a course from a known liberal professor in order to challenge her or his political views. Now, students who already think that philosophy is a waste of time, or some such, come in two groups—the quiet and the loud: those who keep their misgivings and cynicism about philosophy to themselves and silently simmer away in class, and those who are outspoken and want the whole class to know that they have problems with the discipline of philosophy. Regarding the former group—the quiet—I just do what I normally do, with the hope that my passion somehow rubs off on them and that my teaching "works its magic." I know that this is pretty much a pipe dream, but sometimes it actually works. During the semester or at the end, or even a year later, I've had students tell me that I changed their prejudices about philosophy. Regarding the latter group—the loud—well, let's just say that I relish a challenge. So when an outspoken naysayer, a critic of philosophy, takes my class, I will defend my chosen discipline. Politely, of course.

One way I do this is by preparing specially for the kinds of criticisms that I know I will receive. I come into class with a "game face," similar to the kind of approach I took to refereeing soccer matches. I knew that opposing coaches, parents, and sometimes even players would challenge me. I was ready for them. Unbeknownst to them, I would actually look forward to matches. Bring it on.

Ultimately, there are at least three different reasons for why some students don't give a damn about my "lifetime pursuit." Depending on the reason, I react differently: sometimes with sadness, other times with indifference, and, at others, frustration. I do have hope that such students will change their minds, but I have no false hope about this. Some students will not change their minds, and that's perfectly fine.

Specifications Grading: A Useful Two-Year College Alternative

William Behun

MCHENRY COUNTY COLLEGE, ILLINOIS

Cluster grading, or Specifications ("Spec") Grading is a terminology used to describe a loosely connected set of grading approaches that can serve as an alternative to traditional grading schemes, and which can be particularly useful for typical philosophy students in two-year colleges. These students tend not to be philosophy majors, but rather students seeking to fulfill distribution requirements, or non-traditional students. The terminology of Specifications Grading is closely associated with the work of Linda Nilson from the University of Pittsburgh, but it first came to my attention as the result of a union newsletter that outlined some basic principles of Clustering or Specifications Grading.

In short, Spec Grading bases student evaluation simply on completion of sets, or clusters, of assignments rather than evaluating individual assignments on the basis of specific quality standards and applying point or percentage grades for each assignment. For philosophy majors, it is, perhaps, important to ensure that students' assignments are reflective of a high degree of philosophical rigor, including tight argumentation, attention to logical structures, and close reading of primary texts. On the other hand, it is perhaps more important for students in two-year colleges to achieve a more general familiarity with basic principles of philosophical enquiry and clear argumentation. Rather than requiring extended writing assignments, Spec Grading, as I have applied it, on the community college level involves shorter assignments with more conservative goals of understanding key concepts, principles, and texts.

The grading system consists of different kinds of assignments, for example, short analytical essays, vocabulary assignments, quizzes, etc. and the student's grade is dependent on satisfactory completion of these clusters of assignments. As an illustration, from my

introduction to philosophy class, students must complete a cluster of 350- to 500-word analytics papers in order to merely pass. In order to get a C, they must also complete a cluster of vocabulary assignments, and to get a B they must also satisfactorily complete a series of objective quizzes. Finally, to get an A in the class they must complete all of these and also a longer, more in-depth final paper. All of these assignments are assessed on a complete/incomplete basis, which allows the instructor (in this case, me) to return student work much more quickly, and provide sufficient feedback without overwhelming the student. In addition, this system encourages hard work and completion as opposed to traditional point-based or percentage-based grading schemes, which run the risk of students paying more attention to trying to maximize point values rather than concerning themselves with, as it were, the big picture. In general, I have found that students who do not do well in my classes fail, not because they turn in bad work, but because they don't turn in work. Cluster Grading, therefore, allows me to rigorously evaluate students without getting bogged down in point value details by addressing precisely this tendency.

Generally, my experience has been that grade distributions and grade point averages remain consistent whether I am using a point system or a Specifications Grading system. This indicates to me that there is no real discrepancy in terms of the relationship between the grade received and the effort put forward. Ultimately, I believe that Specifications Grading does a better job of rewarding that effort, which, ultimately, I believe is most important in the context of the two-year college experience. In the future, I hope to more fully explore this approach in further articles here in the newsletter, particularly Specifications Grading's usefulness for philosophy instruction at the two-year college level.

A Summer Institute for Community College Philosophy Professors

Richard Legum

KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE-CUNY

I returned to teaching philosophy at Kingsborough Community College six years ago. After twenty-eight years in business, I was convinced that studying philosophy for community college students uniquely develops practical skills—i.e., skills sought out by employers. These are skills that enabled me to smoothly transition from academia to the business world. However, the right teaching methods must be employed and the appropriate educational objectives must be set. When I returned to teaching philosophy, I was concerned that my lack of any formal training in pedagogy might limit my success in conveying these skills to my students. To fill this gap, I attended (and continue to attend) pedagogy-focused faculty interest group sessions organized by the Kingsborough Center for Teaching and Learning. While I learned a great deal from these activities, information specifically tailored for teaching philosophy at community colleges was missing.

Academic freedom to conduct classes as we see fit has some significant downsides for the students. It is a virtue to be able to be creative in our course design. This, unfortunately, forces many of us to improve our teaching methods by experimenting in our courses. My years outside of the academic world in business lead me to believe that this is not the best way to meet our goal of educating students. This violates the adage attributed to the philosopher George Santayana, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹ It would be far better if we could leverage the lessons learned by our predecessors, rather than having our students suffer as we "reinvent the wheel." Our goal should not be to conduct experiments in our classrooms. The goal is to employ the best methods for achieving the appropriate teaching objectives and student learning outcomes. Military training, on which lives depend, is, therefore, not built on the individual instructor's discovering the optimal training method by experiment. Unfortunately, this "Wisdom of Crowds"² is not regularly leveraged in academic philosophy.

As the chair of the APA Committee on Philosophy in Two Year Colleges, I have begun working on an initiative to help close some of these gaps. The initiative would establish (and find funding for) a summer institute focused on teaching philosophy at community colleges. In concept, it would be similar to the summer institutes funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities for college professors. This institute would be held when most community colleges are not in session, e.g., during the month of August. The institute would be guided by philosophers with substantial success in teaching lower-level philosophy courses, who have directed and contributed to successful pedagogical training programs for graduate students in philosophy, and who are thought leaders in philosophy pedagogy. Sessions would include presentations and "hands on" workshops on topics such as the following:

- a comparison of approaches to teaching philosophy (e.g., Historical Approach Learning Classic Philosophical Works vs. Problems Approach looking at Philosophical Problems and Arguments)
- student learning outcomes for philosophy courses
- course offerings
- course design
- classroom and teaching techniques
- online and hybrid courses vs. face-to-face
- philosophy course syllabi
- philosophy exams/paper assignments
- assessment techniques
- choosing textbooks – commercial and open educational resources

- philosophy of education, epistemology, and teaching philosophy

The summer institute would include presentations, “hands-on” workshops, and presentations, as well as opportunities to work on research in philosophy pedagogy and related topics in philosophy, e.g., philosophy of education, cognitive science.

I hope to get this summer institute off the ground in the summer of 2018. I have had some preliminary discussion with philosophers who ran and participated in the Philosophy Department’s graduate student pedagogy program at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center. I invite anyone interested in this initiative to reach out to me with suggestions at rich.legum@gmail.com.

NOTES

1. <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/georgesant101521.html>
2. Patrick Grim, *The Philosopher’s Toolkit: How to be the Most Rational Person in Any Room – Course Guidebook* (The Teaching Company, 2013), 88.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA Committee for Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges invites papers for inclusion in the spring 2018 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, status of adjunct faculty, workload and related issues; faculty scholarship opportunities, research, and writing; and issues dealing with program administration. Co-authored papers are welcome.

All paper submissions should adhere to the following guidelines:

- Deadline: Friday, January 5, 2018
- Papers must be in 12 pt. Times-New Roman font, double-spaced, and should be in the range of 3,000 to 5,000 words, including endnotes. Exceptional papers that fall outside this range may be considered, though this is not guaranteed. Authors are advised to read APA publishing guidelines available on the APA website.
- Pay close attention to all APA formatting restrictions. Submissions that do not conform will be returned to their author(s). Endnotes should follow the Word default using roman numerals to number the notes.
- Papers should be sent to the editor electronically and 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 authors name, title, and full mailing address should also be submitted.

Submissions should be sent to the Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges Committee chair and newsletter editor, Thomas Urban, at TwoYearEditor@gmail.com, by January 5, 2018.

The editor, serving in the capacity of a disinterested coordinator, will distribute all papers to an editorial committee of current and past Two-Year College Committee members for anonymous review and evaluation. This committee will report its findings to members of the newsletter editorial board. The editorial board will make all publishing decisions based on those anonymously refereed results, and conduct any further anonymous review(s) deemed necessary. The editorial board includes Kristen L. Zbikowski, Hibbing Community College (kristenzbikowski@hibbing.edu); Anthony Kreider, Miami-Dade Community College (akreider@mdc.edu); Bill Hartmann, St. Louis Community College (bhartmann@stlcc.edu); and Rick Repetti, Kingsborough Community College–CUNY (Rick.Repetti@kbcc.cuny.edu).