

Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges



SPRING 2018

VOLUME 17 | NUMBER 2

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FROM THE EDITOR

Thomas Urban

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Our two pieces in this issue of the Two-Year Colleges newsletter illustrate both the breadth and diversity of our committee's interests and writing. On the one hand, we find a scholarly interpretation of the Modern Academy by Ian Duckles, which weighs the impact of technology on how we think about it technologically, drawing on the theorizing about science and management by Frederick Winslow Taylor in *The Principles of Scientific Management*, and Martin Heidegger's text *The Question Concerning Technology*. On the other hand is a discussion by Andy Wible that critically addresses the question of difficulty as it applies to *Introduction to Philosophy*.

The concerns of each article, though distinct from one another, are basic to what we see today in the Modern Academy, be it a two-year college or four-year institution. The mythology of the Academy that many older faculty members attempt to preserve is unmasked as an empty promise by the processing of students specified by a ruling technology. The same sense of loss emerges in the alleged "dumbing down" of introductory courses, including *Introduction to Philosophy*. My purpose is not to interpret these articles for our readers, but to invite you to consider their content, and to do so first within the context of two-year colleges, and then to a wider concern for the reality and future of higher education in general. Enjoy!

ARTICLES

*Taylorism, Heidegger, and the Modern Academy*¹

Ian Duckles

SAN DIEGO MESA COLLEGE

I. TAYLORISM

Frederick Winslow Taylor's 1911 monograph, *The Principles of Scientific Management*,² articulates a theory of management that has played an enormous role in completely restructuring industry, and, as I will argue, the Modern Academy. In this paper, I will outline the basic principle of the view that has come to be known as Taylorism,

show how those basic principles are increasingly being used as the basis for administering the Modern Academy, and then develop a critique of those principles influenced by Heidegger and his seminal 1962 essay, "The Question Concerning Technology."³ I will conclude by considering some of the major implications of these connections that I have drawn.

According to Taylor himself, his theory of scientific management has four core principles: "First: The development of a true science. Second: The scientific selection of the workman. Third: His scientific education and development. Fourth: Intimate friendly cooperation between the management and the men."⁴ Regarding the first two points, Taylor demonstrates in detail how one can apply science to the workplace and use science to increase efficiency. He describes how one can undertake what he calls variously a "time" or "motion study" in which one examines each movement performed by a worker, times with a stopwatch how long each movement takes, eliminates extraneous movements, and then trains the worker to perform exactly and only the necessary moves. This is used to establish a baseline for how long it should take a worker to perform each task. This information is then used to determine which workers to hire, namely, those who can perform the task in the amount of time that the manager determines it should actually take to perform.

In describing these first two steps, Taylor contrasts his method of scientific management with the then-dominant older method, which he calls "initiative and incentive." Under this older model, the job of the manager is merely to provide incentives (usually financial, but not necessarily) to induce the workers to use their own initiative to find the best way to complete the task. Under this older model, the workers have a great deal of autonomy as long as they perform their assigned tasks in a timely manner, and the manager doesn't need to do much beyond keeping an eye on things and developing the proper scheme of incentives. Under this older model, one does not require very many managers or foreman, so most of the employees are actual workers, with just a few managers overseeing them.

By contrast, under Taylor's scientific management, the manager or foreman is much more intimately involved with the employees and takes a much more active role in guiding and directing them. Returning to the third and fourth core principles, once the employer has determined how long a particular job should take and has hired employees who can do the job in the allotted time, the manager must then expend an enormous amount of effort to train the employee to do the task in the way the employer, through

time and motion studies, has determined is the best way to do it. This requires, essentially, one-on-one training for days or weeks at a time. In addition, it requires a significant increase in the number of managers to create and maintain the conditions to have effective scientific management. "Under functional [scientific] management the old-fashioned single foreman is superseded by eight different men, each one of whom has his own special duties."⁵ As Taylor notes, under his system "There is an almost equal division of the work and the responsibility between the management and the workmen."⁶ As already shown, this method involves an eightfold increase in the number of managers, and, according to the case studies he presents, a 70–80 percent reduction in the size of the workforce.⁷

Finally, there are two more important elements to Taylor's theory. First, under this theory, the manager has a better understanding of the job than the actual worker. In fact, Taylor goes so far as to argue that the worker is incapable of understanding his job to the extent that the manager does:

These illustrations should make perfectly clear our original proposition that in practically all of the mechanic arts the science which underlies each workman's act is so great and amounts to so much that the workman who is best suited to actually doing the work is incapable, either through lack of education or through insufficient mental capacity, of understanding this science.⁸

This is contrasted with the old "initiative and incentive" system in which the worker is seen as the expert in his job. Secondly, as the name suggests, Taylor's scientific management requires a great deal of scientific machinery and know-how. Taylor's method is inherently data-based, so it requires the collection and analysis of enormous amounts of data. Taylor has extended descriptions of special proprietary slide rules that he and others have developed. In addition, he notes that the use of scientific management will require the construction of dedicated facilities for housing all the data, as well as providing a fixed work area for the analysis of this data. Despite all these increased costs, Taylor goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the enormous increases in efficiency and productivity (that is, profit) that his system provides easily outweigh the additional administrative costs associated with this new system of management.⁹

II. TAYLORISM IN THE MODERN ACADEMY

In turning to the application of Taylorism to the Modern Academy, I don't intend to argue that administrators and trustees or governors read Taylor and applied those principles to higher education. Instead, when I turn to Heidegger, I intend to show that both Taylor and the Modern Academy are operating under a similar mindset or *Weltanschauung*. This *Weltanschauung* may very well have different origins in each case, but I will show that it is the same *Weltanschauung* such that we see analogous impacts between the principles Taylor articulated and the principles that are increasingly being used to run the Modern Academy.

Starting with Taylor's first principle, we can see how education is increasingly oriented around the development of a "science of teaching," particularly with the rise of learning outcomes at the colleges. Anyone who currently teaches in higher education is familiar with the SLO (Student Learning Outcomes) movement in higher education. The point of SLOs is to find a way to collect data on the instructional experience that can then be analyzed and evaluated. The end goal, despite some administrative statements to the contrary, is to use this data to evaluate faculty and inform hiring and discipline procedures. According to Standard III.A.6 of the ACCJC,¹⁰

The evaluation of faculty, academic administrators, and other personnel directly responsible for student learning includes, as a component of that evaluation, consideration of how these employees use the results of the assessment of learning outcomes to improve teaching and learning.¹¹

The core idea is that educators do not know how to properly evaluate teaching and learning, so an external standard must be imposed upon them. This standard is entirely data driven and that data impacts the evaluation process that determines whether adjuncts are rehired, and also governs the tenure and promotion process for contract faculty. This is a clear example of the attempt to scientize the teaching profession very much in accordance with Taylor's second principle of Scientific Management.

We can also see this same idea at work in a recent document produced by Carol A. Twig on behalf of the Lumina Foundation. In this document she articulates a method for reforming higher education that looks suspiciously like the time and motion studies advocated by Taylor:

NCAT developed a spreadsheet-based course planning tool (CPT) for institutions to do the following: 1) determine all personnel (faculty, adjunct instructors, teaching assistants, peer tutors and professional staff) costs expressed as an hourly rate; 2) identify the tasks associated with preparing and offering the course in a traditional format; 3) determine how much time each person involved in preparing and offering the course in a traditional format spends on each of the tasks; 4) repeat steps one through three for the redesigned format; 5) enter the data in the CPT. The CPT then automatically calculates the cost of both formats and converts the data to a comparable cost-per-student measure.¹²

This is perhaps the clearest example I have come across of the use of time and motion studies in the higher academy. Here we can see quite clearly the attempt to break down all the work of a professor into discrete steps that can then be redistributed among different faculty and staff to dramatically "de-skill" and "de-professionalize" education in exactly the same way that Taylor sought to "de-skill" industrial labor in his day. The end goal, of course, is to increase productivity and reduce costs.

Turning to the third principle, many faculty in higher education have been resisting this scientification of education, but we can see this trend reach fruition at large, private, for-profit schools such as the University of Phoenix. They use an extremely regimented teaching schedule with very little faculty input on course design or implementation. Shells with assignments, lectures, textbooks, etc. are set up and the instructor just comes in and runs the course.¹³ There is very little room for innovation or for faculty members to implement their own lesson plans. In effect, the professors become just interchangeable units that can be swapped out as necessary, and anyone who meets the minimum qualifications for teaching can be inserted into one of these courses with very little training or experience. This is another clear attempt at de-skilling or de-professionalizing the job of the educator.

Finally, we can see Taylor's fourth principle in action by looking at the enormous rise in the number of administrators and support staff in higher education. One can find a very vivid illustration of this by looking at staffing patterns in community colleges. According to the data there are now more administrators and support staff than there are full-time faculty. "Public nonresearch institutions in 1990 averaged roughly twice as many full-time faculty as administrators—more than 20 years later, the two were almost equal."¹⁴ As the number of administrators rise, the college is increasingly run in accordance with the values that these administrators care about. In general, these administrators increasingly focus on data and emphasize hitting certain target numbers. In effect, the teaching profession has been reduced to a series of data points, and the performance of departments and programs is evaluated on the basis of whether or not certain data targets are met.

A clear example of these trends comes from a recent article in *Inside Higher Education* about a decision by Mills College in Oakland to lay off several tenured faculty and eliminate a number of departments including the philosophy department.¹⁵ The Provost and Dean of Faculty Julia Chinyere Oparah gave the following justification for the decision: "But the school also has to consider which majors and minors students select, and philosophy is not a top choice; the college currently has just three philosophy majors."¹⁶ Here we can see that the college administrators are basing their instructional decisions on data that is easy to collect and understand, namely, number of majors. Under this mindset that is so closely aligned with scientific management, there is no consideration of other, less tangible considerations. For example, one of the affected professors, Marc Joseph, rightfully asks, "How does one have a liberal arts program without a philosophy program?"¹⁷ In contrasting these quotations from Dean Oparah and Professor Joseph we can see a clear articulation of the different and competing *Weltanschauungen* that are fighting for control of the modern academy. The dean is only concerned with hitting certain target numbers and if those numbers aren't met, programs and faculty are eliminated. By contrast, the professor is concerned with the quality of education that is being provided by the institution.

At this point one might reasonably ask, "So what?" If my claim that the academy has adopted many of the principles of scientific management is true, what does this matter? If it produces a more efficient academy and a better learning experience for students, while reducing costs, then that is all for the best, isn't it? In what follows I will use a Heideggerian analysis to argue that there are significant problems with this approach that are damaging to pedagogy and what should be the core mission of an academic institution.

III. HEIDEGGER

I will begin by briefly summarizing the core points of Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology." The core of Heidegger's analysis here is the claim that the essence of technology is not to be found in any particular technological device, but rather that the essence of technology amounts to a certain worldview or way in which the world is disclosed to us. Much of Heidegger's later thought concerns an examination of the ways in which the world appears or shows up to us. These different *Weltanschauungen* amount to different frameworks through which individuals understand and interpret the world they find themselves in. In addition, these different frameworks also play a role in shaping the nature of truth and provide standards for what counts as true or false within that given *Weltanschauung*.

As Heidegger sees it, our current worldview is the technological worldview of Enframing (*das Gestell*), and the defining feature of this worldview is that everything in the world shows up to us as a resource (*der Bestand*, often translated as "standing reserve") to be used and exploited by humanity solely for our own benefit. Heidegger illustrates this point by looking at different ways of viewing and conceptualizing the Rhine River. He contrasts our modern way of looking at the river with the way the river is viewed in a poem by Hölderlin: "What the river is now, namely, a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station."¹⁸ That is, the river gets its meaning and the river is understood based on its relation to the power station and as a source of power for that power station. One might object that we nevertheless still make an effort to preserve nature in the form of parks or national monuments, but even this is still governed by the worldview of Enframing. In discussing the Rhine again Heidegger writes, "But, it will be replied, the Rhine is still a river in a landscape, is it not? Perhaps. But how? In no other way than as an object on call for a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry."¹⁹ Even as a landscape, the Rhine is still conceptualized within the framework of Enframing where everything is understood as a resource to be used and exploited, in this case as a recreation destination or a setting for tour groups.

Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in looking at the department at a corporation or college that is responsible for hiring people and managing employee benefits. This department is, of course, called the Human Resources Department. This is significant because even the

name makes clear that humans are being conceptualized as resources, and just like any resource they are there to be used and exploited by others for their convenience. This demonstrates the degree to which the technological worldview of Enframing dominates how we understand the world and our place within it.

Since Heidegger focuses so much on Enframing in this essay, it is helpful to contrast this particular worldview or mode of disclosing with a worldview that Heidegger seems to find more authentic. This is the worldview of *poiesis/phusis*. *Phusis* is the Greek word for “nature” and also means “to grow or to spring forth,” and is, of course, the root word for “physics.” For Heidegger, *Phusis* is the process whereby a *Weltanschauung* is revealed or opened up by the activity of Beings. This is tied to *poiesis*, a Greek word meaning “to make” and which is the root of our word “poetry.” For Heidegger *poiesis* is the process by which humans make meaning out of the world and imbue the world with meaning. These two concepts of *phusis* and *poiesis* are connected by Heidegger: “*Phusis* also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing forth, *poiesis*. *Phusis* is indeed *poiesis* in the highest sense.”²⁰ This becomes important as this is an authentic mode of revealing because it demonstrates the active role that humans play in creating truth and revealing the world to ourselves.

This then points to Heidegger’s biggest criticism of Enframing and the technological worldview, namely, the fact that it covers up or hides its nature as a mode of disclosing, and covers up what it fundamentally means to be human: to create structures of meaning and intelligibility in the world. “Where Enframing holds sway, regulating and securing of the standing-reserve mark all revealing. They no longer even let their own fundamental characteristic appear, namely, this revealing as such.”²¹ In this sense Enframing is an inauthentic worldview because it covers up or conceals the very fact of its own existence. When caught in the worldview of Enframing, humans don’t even realize that they are caught in this worldview, and they just take the assumptions and values inherent in Enframing for granted as just features of the world as it actually is and has always been. People become trapped in this worldview and don’t even realize that alternative and more authentic ways of conceptualizing and understanding the world are available.

IV. TAYLOR, HEIDEGGER, AND THE MODERN ACADEMY

Having explained Taylorism and shown how those principles are at work in the Modern Academy, I can now turn to a critique of these principles using the tools developed by Heidegger.

To begin, I will look at Taylor’s “initiative and incentive” model and contrast it with the “scientific management” model, which I will then match up with Heidegger’s concerns about *poiesis/phusis* and how it is being covered up or obscured by Enframing.

One really good way to see this contrast in the Modern Academy is actually to step away from the faculty of the Academy and look at how these trends have played out among custodial workers. This will be useful, first, because we probably ought to think more about the often invisible custodial workers who do so much that allow faculty, administrators, staff, and students to focus on teaching and learning. Second, it will be useful because the examples are so striking. In discussing custodial workers, I will be focusing on research that was conducted by Peter Magolda at two Midwestern colleges: “Harrison” and “Compton” Universities (like all the names used in his work, Magolda has changed them and some of the details of the two universities at which he conducted his research in order to preserve anonymity.)²²

In his book, Magolda contrasts two perspectives on custodial work. The first is the perspective preferred by the actual custodial workers, which Magolda calls “a customer service management ideology,” which is contrasted with an ideology of “corporate managerialism” that is favored by administrators. The “customer service management ideology” is one that is focused on serving the interests of the customers the custodians are serving. The highest priority is placed on customer satisfaction, and the roles and responsibilities of the custodian are viewed through this lens.²³ The “corporate managerialism” ideology, by contrast, is focused on fiscal stability and takes centralizing power, minimizing labor costs, and increasing accountability of custodial workers as the primary principles through which custodial work is viewed, understood, and evaluated.

It is first important to note that this distinction between two ideological approaches matches up almost perfectly with Taylor’s distinction between “initiative and incentive” and “scientific management.” Under the customer service model, custodial workers have the autonomy to decide how best to satisfy the needs of the groups they service. By contrast, under the principles of “corporate managerialism,” the administrators are seen as the source of knowledge and the custodial staff is expected to conform to these managerial insights. In the imposition of this ideology we can see scientific management at work.

Applying Heidegger to this framework, we can see a parallel between his analysis of an authentic model of *poiesis/phusis* and Enframing. The “customer service”/“initiative and incentive” models are ones that privilege and prioritize the actual insights and perspectives of the individuals actually doing these jobs. Under these models, they are encouraged to employ their own skills and understandings of the needs of the situations and problems they are confronted with to develop solutions and strategies for the proper performance of their tasks. By contrast, under the “corporate managerialism”/“scientific management” model, these individuals are no longer given autonomy, but are instead expected to work under a one-size-fits-all approach that is determined by supervisors who often have no experience or understanding of the jobs they are managing. This totalizing approach further alienates the workers and attempts to completely cover up and suppress the individuality of the workers in question.

Magolda provides an excellent example of this when he reprints the Custodian Inspection Rubric used by Compton University.²⁴ This rubric attempts to quantify, using a 100-point scale, the work of custodians. They are expected to score an 85 or above with a lower score indicating some kind of deficiency on the part of the custodian. Under this model, “supervisors, not workers, know what counts as ‘good.’”²⁵

This serves as a good example of Enframing or scientific management in that it seeks to reduce everything the custodial worker does to a framework that is quantifiable and calculable. In effect, the very humanity of the custodial worker is lost as they are simply reduced to a numerical score on a rubric and all individuality and particularity is completely covered up and erased. This example, taken from the custodial ranks of the college staff, is nevertheless a good illustration of the trends that are at work in the Modern Academy. This is further reinforced if we recall the situation at Mills College described earlier. This attempt to eliminate professors and whole departments based on a failure to satisfy certain targets demonstrates that this “corporate managerialism” mindset is being applied to the faculty ranks as well.

A second point of connection concerns the role of data in the Modern Academy. As I noted earlier, modern college administrators put an enormous confidence in data and devote a great deal of time and energy collecting as much data as possible. Most schools, for example, have an Office of Institutional Research that consists of deans and staff. This office produces a variety of reports, and, based on my own experiences, these reports inform numerous campus policies and decisions from what courses to offer to when to offer them. In addition, as noted earlier, the standards of evaluation focus on these data-driven metrics. Our campus knows how successful it is by looking at the persistence and completion numbers provided by this data. Data is extremely important to the functioning of the Modern Academy.

In effect, this reliance on data is an outgrowth of the Enframing mindset that has come to dominate the Modern Academy. Data is seen as important because the Academy has adopted a certain worldview that views data as important. There are other worldviews that don’t have that same demand or vision. I argue that the data isn’t collected because it is actually useful. Rather, the data is collected because it can be (data collection is always based on measures that are easy to calculate) and then ways are found to use that data, even if those uses go against the core mission of the Academy. The example of Mills College again perfectly illustrates this point.

V. CONCLUSION

At this point, I have shown that Taylorism and the principles increasingly governing the Modern Academy can be profitably understood through the lens of Heidegger’s concept of Enframing in which everything is viewed as a resource. To conclude, I will identify a number of implications or consequences of this perspective.

First, the dominance of the Enframing mindset is at odds with the mission of the Modern Academy and higher education generally. To the degree that Enframing covers up that it is a mode of disclosing, it also covers up other ways of conceptualizing the world. This is problematic because one of the goals of a liberal higher education should be exposing students to new ideas and perspectives, but this effort is challenged by the totalizing work of Enframing to cover up other modes of disclosing and other *Weltanschauung*.

Second, seeing the link between Taylorism and the Modern Academy should help professors see that, ultimately, they are subject to the same pressures and problems as workers in any industry. That is, despite pretensions to the contrary, education work is labor work, and when labor is suffering or negatively impacted, education is as well. I hope that this perspective can help foster greater solidarity among all segments of the workforce and that “white-collar” professors can realize that they are impacted and subjected to the same negative forces that are impacting “blue-collar” custodians and other laborers. Hopefully, this will also reinforce the importance of the old IWW slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Finally, seeing the connection between the principles of the Modern Academy and Enframing can also suggest a potential solution to these problems. If, as I have argued, the problems impacting the Modern Academy are a result of the Enframing mindset, then looking at solutions to overcome the Enframing mindset may provide guidance for how to overcome the problems I have identified with the Modern Academy.

What might these solutions be? According to Heidegger, while Enframing is a totalizing and inauthentic worldview, it also contains within it the seeds of its own overcoming. Quoting Hölderlin, Heidegger writes, “But, where danger is, grows/The saving power also.”²⁶ While he is more cryptic about the meaning of this than we might like, I take him to be arguing that the very crisis created by Enframing may push humanity to overcome it and adopt a more authentic worldview.

This solution lies in developing what Hubert Dreyfus called a “Free-relation to Technology.”²⁷ The solution to Enframing is not to become a Luddite and abandon or eliminate all technology, but rather to employ technology where it is useful while at the same time acknowledging that one of the fundamental characteristics of our human nature is the role we play in disclosing and creating meaning. We need to realize that Enframing is not a necessary feature of human existence but actually a choice or decision we have made about how to see the world. There is nothing inevitable or necessary about this worldview, and we are free to adopt other worldviews that are more authentic and that can serve us and our students more effectively.

NOTES

1. This paper is dedicated to the late Hubert Dreyfus [REDACTED].
2. Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Dover Publications: Mineola, NY, 1998).

3. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977).
4. Taylor, 68n.
5. *Ibid.*, 64.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. According to these case studies, one involved a reduction from 600 to 140 workers, and a second involved a reduction from 120 to 35. See Taylor 35 and 49.
8. Taylor 50.
9. See, for example, Taylor, 35ff.
10. The Accrediting Commission for Junior and Community Colleges is the main accrediting body for community colleges in California, Hawaii, and US territories in the Pacific.
11. ACCJC, "Accreditation Standards," Web (June 2014). Accessed July 17, 2017, <https://accjc.org/wp-content/uploads/Accreditation-Standards-Adopted-June-2014.pdf>.
12. Carol A. Twigg, "Improving Quality and Reducing Costs: The Case for Redesign," Lumina Foundation, (publication date unknown), accessed January 4, 2017, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/publications/collegecosts/twigg.pdf>.
13. Joshua Kim, "Rejected by U of P," *Inside Higher Ed* (February 7, 2010), accessed December 29, 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/technology_and_learning/rejected_by_u_of_p.
14. Donna M. Desrochers and Rita Kirshstein, "Labor Intensive or Labor Expensive?: Changing Staffing Patterns in Higher Education," Delta Cost Project (February 2014): 13, accessed June 26, 2017, http://www.deltacostproject.org/sites/default/files/products/DeltaCostAIR_Staffing_Brief_2_3_14.pdf.
15. Rick Seltzer, "Philosophy Department on Chopping Block at Mills," *Inside Higher Ed* (June 12, 2017), accessed June 12, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2017/06/12/philosophy-department-chopping-block-mills#.WUBT6j5Vn-Y.mailto>.
16. Emily Deruy, "Mills College to Lay Off at Least 8 Professors, Cut Philosophy Program," *The Mercury News* (June 9, 2017), accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.mercurynews.com/2017/06/09/mills-college-to-lay-off-at-least-8-professors-cut-philosophy-program/>. In the article it is not clear if this is a direct quote, but the position articulated here is attributed to Dean Oparah.
17. Quoted in Seltzer.
18. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 16.
19. *Ibid.*, 16.
20. *Ibid.*, 10.
21. *Ibid.*, 27.
22. Peter Magolda, *The Lives of Campus Custodians: Insights into Corporatization and Civic Disengagement in the Academy* (Sterling Virginia: Stylus, 2016), 13, note 1.
23. Magolda does note that from a faculty perspective, this customer service model of "give the people what they want" is deeply at odds with how most faculty conceptualize their roles and responsibilities. That being said, while such a model doesn't really work for education, it may very well be the best and most authentic framework for custodial work. See Magolda, *The Lives of Campus Custodians*, 140.
24. *Ibid.*, 148.
25. *Ibid.*, 149.
26. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 34.
27. This analysis is based on private discussions with Hubert Dreyfus at UC Berkeley in the mid-1990s. I may have accidentally confabulated some of this stuff, and Dreyfus himself may have evolved into a different understanding. Nevertheless, the credit for anything valuable in this analysis should go to him while all deficiencies are my own fault.

How Hard Should an Introduction to Philosophy Class Be?

Andy Wible

MUSKEGON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Two-year colleges mainly teach introductory philosophy classes. Introduction to Philosophy is the most popular of those classes. Generally, it is the philosophy department's most important course, both financially and as a way to attract students to take other classes. Yet it seems something of a mystery about the level of difficulty for this class. The answer is left up to professional discretion. Philosophy classes are as hard as the teacher wants. Yet this vague relativistic answer seems unsatisfactory. Courses can be too easy and too tough. So this paper will explore how hard they should be and suggest a few minimum requirements for any philosophy course.

One view is that a class at a two-year college should be just as hard as the transfer institution's equivalent class. Students who take philosophy at two-year colleges are mainly transfer students seeking a bachelor's degree. Thus if classes are going to transfer and be awarded the same credit at transfer colleges, then they should be equally difficult. Many instructors at two-year colleges do use this as their standard to ensure students are ready for upper-level classes when they transfer. Instructors will often use the same books and mimic the syllabus of the main transfer institution.

However, this approach is not universal for many reasons. First, the way Introduction to Philosophy is taught at four-year schools differs greatly between institutions. The style of an Introduction to Philosophy class might be historical or problems based. Some syllabi will have all primary source material; others will have little to none. Some syllabi have multiple papers and others have one or none. Even if one institution has decided to make their introductory classes uniform, there are often two or three main transfer institutions where students go that differ from each other.

Second, many two-year faculty believe that community colleges and community college students are different. Students should be taught differently at a two-year school. Two-year schools are often second-chance institutions. Students may not have succeeded in the normal school structure and therefore two-year schools should try something different. Students at two-year schools may lack the background and sometimes the aptitude that students at four-year schools have. Plus, they are often working or have family obligations that students at four-year schools do not. Papers should be shorter or nonexistent, smaller quizzes and practice tests should be given instead of two big exams, questions should be easier, and grading should be more lenient. Teachers need to help students develop confidence so that they can succeed in higher-level courses.

The concern with this second approach is that the courses are being “dumbed down.” Two-year schools are not billed as easier institutions. If they were, as is the case with some for-profit institutions, their credits would not transfer. High standards must be maintained for such institutions to flourish. Also, community college students are often well able to handle rigorous work. Students attend community colleges for a number of reasons. They attend due to the cost, proximity to home, a sick parent, or the school’s reputation, and not necessarily because they could not get into a four-year institution. Due to the open admissions policy of most two-year schools, often there are more unprepared students at two-year schools. Yet even these students can often handle rigorous work, and if they cannot, perhaps they should not pass the course. Students are not respected if this view is taken. Good two-year schools have a reputation for getting students well prepared for transfer. Students then often come back saying that the four-year school’s classes were easier than they expected or that they had a good foundation for the greater challenge.

Demanding this rigor does not mean that two-year college instructors cannot do anything different or unique in striving to help unprepared students. Two-year colleges tend to have smaller class sizes to increase student-teacher interaction. Also, additional tutoring can be utilized, and supplemental course time can even be devoted to helping students succeed. Alternative approaches to teaching can also be utilized, such as flipped classrooms, as long as the content and rigor does not suffer. Two-year teachers are dedicated to teaching and should always be striving to find better instruction methods that increase knowledge and ability.

We might also ask whether it is acceptable or desirable that more students drop out or fail at a two-year school if the students are sometimes less talented and prepared. Community colleges are cheaper than most other schools, but it seems wrong, as has happened at many for-profit schools, to waste students’ money and time when they are unlikely to graduate. Good placement tests and remedial coursework are needed to avoid these problems. Nonetheless, in general, a professor who goes from a four-year to a two-year school should expect to see a higher dropout and failure rate at the two-year school. But we should be careful. There is often bias from instructors who just don’t expect two-year students to be as good. They should not be underestimated. Two-year students often work harder because they tend to be older and they appreciate being given a second chance. This hard work can elevate them to or even above the level of four-year students.

Another interesting question still remains as to whether a course can be rigorous if students are not talented or adequately prepared to take it. Good Introduction to Philosophy courses should involve some discussion, and yet that discussion is only as good as the participants. Even the most gifted instructor will have difficulty fostering a lively discussion with unprepared and uninterested students. Sometimes, at both two- and four-year levels, instructors just switch to lecturing to avoid this concern. But this seems to neglect the independent critical reasoning that philosophy should develop. At the introductory level the

discussion at times may be less robust, but the tests and papers should be comparably rigorous to what someone would assign at a four-year school.

A final option for rigor is to have standards high enough to maintain accreditation from organizations such as the Higher Learning Commission. Most two-year colleges go through a thorough process every five to ten years in order to continue operating. These accreditation agencies set the bar for colleges to receive financial aid, transfer classes, and benefit from the accreditation’s seal of approval. The problem is that they don’t really have a standard to judge colleges. They tend to leave it to colleges and disciplines to set their own standards, which colleges must then prove that they have met. Hence the outcomes and metrics can differ greatly between schools and even between departments within schools.

In some occupational fields, the standards are clear. There is a national or regional test that must be passed and employers must be hiring the graduates. Philosophy and other liberal arts classes are not job-specific and there is no national philosophy test that allows one to become a Philosopher King or Queen. Given recent election events, perhaps this should be reconsidered.

Philosophy professors at two-year colleges enjoy considerable professional latitude. But we must still ask, how hard should classes be? How many papers should be assigned? How many tests? Should the tests be multiple choice or essay? Should there be primary-source readings? What topics should be covered? How many? The answers to these questions are not evident, and successful teachers disagree. Part of the answer, though, might come from looking at the goals of philosophy. What outcomes do we want from an introduction to philosophy class? If we know the end, then we can figure out the necessary requirements to get there.

First, the class should focus on logic and critical thinking. Logical reasoning is the method of philosophy. Any class that dealt only with history and not with arguments would be as poor a philosophy class as a painting class that dealt only with the history of art. An introduction to philosophy class will not focus on reasoning as explicitly as a critical thinking or introduction to logic class, but a basic applied approach must still be present. Critical thinking skills are developed in all philosophy courses, unlike some other disciplines in which such skills are not developed until students take upper-level classes. These are the transferable skills that will benefit students long after they forgot Aquinas’s third proof for God’s existence.

Second, the goal of Philosophy 101 courses should be to introduce students to the topics studied in philosophy. From epistemology to ethics, philosophical issues are central to how we understand the world and the way we live. Whether this is done through a historical approach or a problems approach is up to the instructor as long as arguments are central. A course would be too easy that just looked at the various answers to the free will problem and other issues. Nevertheless, the arguments examined during a section on the philosophy of mind should not be

as in-depth as those examined in an upper-level course in the philosophy of mind.

Third, difficult topics should be tackled in philosophy. Philosophy looks at the big tough questions, and an introduction to philosophy class should do so. One main area that is essential is philosophy of religion. Introduction to Philosophy is a feeder to other classes, but most students will only take this one philosophy class. Religion is so pervasive and is capable of causing great joy and harm in society. But religious beliefs are not rigorously evaluated in most academic classes, as they are thought to be a personal matter and thus off limits in public dialogue. Philosophers must be the ones to reasonably buck this notion. Students need to grapple with the arguments for God's existence and the problem of evil if we are to develop good, critically aware citizens.

Finally, writing is central to philosophy. Good reasoning requires laying out sentences in logical order. It involves organizing one's thoughts clearly to support one's conclusion, and evaluating others' attempts to do so too. The number, type, and length of writing assignments can differ between instructors, but they must be given, be carefully graded, and be focused on evaluating and constructing arguments.

The goals of philosophy make philosophy courses more difficult than many students expect when entering a first class. Many students simply see the disagreement in philosophy, assume there is no truth, and believe the discipline boils down to pontificating on whatever comes to mind. But as we know, logical reasoning is difficult and takes training. An introductory philosophy class is not simply an appreciation class like a theater or music appreciation class that attempts to give students a taste of the discipline so that they can gain a deeper appreciation of it. An introductory philosophy class must take a step further and have students do philosophy. They must evaluate and construct arguments, rather than just watching others do so. Appreciation in philosophy also goes beyond that in other classes because the topics and arguments are usually quite general and abstract. The arguments and readings in an introductory class tend to be some of the easier ones in philosophy to comprehend, but they are nonetheless still abstract and relatively complex.

Reflection on the objectives of philosophy reveals that introductory philosophy classes must check several boxes. There should be papers that challenge students to evaluate arguments and construct their own, and there should also be other testing to ensure that students are gaining understanding of the material. A second reason that tests are needed is to avoid another rigor problem: cheating. There can be too much outside assistance or even the writing of entire papers by people other than the student in the class. Tests, when administered properly, can only be done by the student.

Even if all these guidelines are followed, there will still be great differences in rigor among Introduction to Philosophy courses. Test questions can differ in difficulty and in format. Paper rubrics and grading standards can differ

as well. Discussions about difficulty will continue, and a commitment to our students and to high standards is tough to maintain. The more work that students are given, the more work we have as instructors, and some assignments, such as papers, are immensely more difficult and time consuming to grade. Given the number of sections taught by two-year instructors, there is some incentive to require less of students. Good instructors will fight these tendencies to ensure rigorous classes that benefits students and society.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA Committee for Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges invites papers for inclusion in the spring 2019 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 4, 2019
- 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 newsletter editor at TwoYearEditor@gmail.com, by January 4, 2019.

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).