Conference Paper

On the Way to Non-Hierarchical Communication: Methods of Reading and Writing in Teaching Philosophy to University Students

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the problem of organizing non-hierarchical communication in the university classroom. The authors suggest that some teaching methods can bring the gap in communication between teacher and student. The authors describe and analyze their experience with the use of reading and writing methods adopted in the liberal arts education system for teaching the philosophy to non-humanities majors at a Russian university. This case is significant because it reflects the five-year experience of using reading and writing methods in isolation from the entire humanitarian system. This isolation affects the choice of methods and their transformation. The article outlines the main difficulties that instructors face and the limitations of these methods. Difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of the considered methods are revealed. An analysis of student feedback on the seminars shows that these methods help bridge the gap in communication between teacher and student and create a supportive environment conducive to more effective work on philosophical texts.

Keywords: liberal arts education, reading and writing, philosophy education, communication gap

1. Introduction

The course 'Introduction to Philosophy' is a mandatory subject at Russian universities and those who teach this course have to think of various engaging strategies such as provocation, games, problem-solving, project work and so on [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. The generally declared aim of these methodological efforts is to teach students to think independently, that is, to be able to articulate their opinion, providing evidence and arguments to support it. Regardless of whether our colleagues are proponents of the competency-based approach to learning, innovative techniques in education or they tend to be more focused on the discipline-specific demands, they have to deal with the teacher-student communication gap, that is, a situation when the content and goals

of the course chosen by the instructor do not correspond to the level of the students' learning skills. The communication gap results from the traditional hierarchy of learning: the instructor's authority in the classroom stems from his or her confidence, expertise and knowledge of philosophical texts. Students, in their turn, have different backgrounds and previous experience in education, for instance, they may lack knowledge in the field of humanities because at school little attention was paid to these subjects, they don't have experience of working with philosophical texts. In the traditional power structure, students should be willing to accept the instructor's authority and to subordinate their personal preferences to the instructor's decisions. Moreover, while the instructor may be passionate about the subject, students often feel that they are being 'forced' to study philosophy.

One cannot deny the differences in expertise, authority and motivation that exist between the student and the instructor. While teaching philosophy to freshmen of the Ural State University of Economics (Ekaterinburg, Russia), we faced the above-described communication gap, which we sought to overcome by reconsidering the root of the problem -- the traditional inequality grounded in the difference in expertise between the instructor and the student. We believe that while teaching philosophy to freshmen, we should try to bring their life experiences into the class to enrich discussions, and that their experiences are as valuable as the teacher's expertise. Although it is by no means a panacea for the communication gap, it enhances horizontal communication and promotes classroom conversation as a teaching method originating in Socratic dialogues [6], [7], [8]. In this article, we discuss the methods we use in our teaching to overcome the teacher-student communication gap and the limitations of the methods.

2. Methods

We discuss the methods of reading and writing from the system of liberal arts education. Our conclusions are the result of a case study. We are exploring our own experience with these methods of reading and writing. We rely on a 5-year systematic observation of how students perform proposed tasks, critically reflect on our own handouts, and analyze the anonymous students' responses to practical lessons on the course 'Introduction to Philosophy'.

Our hypothesis is that the considered methods allow to overcome the teacher-student communication gap. This hypothesis is based on the key ideas of the concept of liberal arts education. According to them, this education model is a modern form of organizing the process of education 'designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to

learn and think critically' [8, 9]. This system is considered to have originated in antiquity [10]. It is distinguished by a flexible curriculum, interdisciplinary character and a student-centered pedagogy that requires students to engage directly with texts throughout their learning process [9, 17]. The liberal arts education model prioritizes such values as critical thinking and freedom. We got acquainted with this model at the workshop hosted by the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University and found that the goals of liberal learning coincide with the goals we pursue when teaching philosophy to our students.

The methods of reading and writing [11], [12] follow the Read-to-Write Strategy [13, 119]. Not only do these methods help develop students' critical thinking skills, but they also enable the instructor to create space for free classroom dialogue. In this article, we are going to describe the specific methods of reading and writing and our experience of using them in the philosophy seminars we conducted for non-humanities majors as well as the difficulties we faced in the process. We are also going to analyze our students' feedback on the seminars, revealing their perspective on the communicative processes in the classroom.

3. Methodology of Teaching Reading and Writing to University Students and Their Feedback

3.1. Used methods and their limitations

The methods of teaching reading and writing described further are aimed at creating a positive environment rich in opportunities for peer discussion. Moreover, these methods help students learn to read philosophical texts and create texts of their own as responses to the source texts discussed in the classroom [14]. These methods are suitable both for collective and individual work. Individual tasks are done both by the students and by the instructor, who is not exempt from the general rules of the seminar. The instructor monitors closely and maintains control over the activities, including the final reporting stage, and gives students follow-up assignments. The instructor does not assess students' answers as 'right' or 'wrong'. Such organization of classroom work makes the traditional learning hierarchy more flexible and encourages students to approach the assignments creatively rather than to reproduce the answers they prepared at home since all ideas they come up with are considered as equally important.

It should be noted at this point that our description of the methods below is based on our personal experience of conducting philosophy seminars for non-humanities majors.

Since we are dwelling on our subjective experience, this study by no means claims to be a comprehensive account of the problem, although some of our colleagues admitted facing the same recurring situations that we did. We believe that our experience would be of practical use to those interested in making their seminars more student-centered, engaging and interesting.

Free focused writing requires that a student writes continuously for a set period of time on a topic chosen by the instructor or the students themselves related to the general theme of the class. The question should be formulated by the instructor in such a way that it is clear that there is no 'right' answer. It is a 5-15-minute exercise. Students are free to choose to write anything and in any form as long as they provide arguments to support their opinions. Before the exercise starts, the instructor tells the students that he or she is going to mark their works (the answers are first read aloud to the whole group and then submitted). This methodology is suitable for working with any text and enables students to focus on the problems central to this class. It also helps students develop their skills of explaining their viewpoints by taking into account who will be on the receiving side of their writing.

> We used this method frequently because it can be easily adjusted to the traditional system of teaching. The main problem we faced concerned the formulation of the question. If the instructor formulates the question him- or herself, it means that the question is 'imposed' on the students and thus the traditional university hierarchy is reinforced. If the instructor offers the students to formulate the question themselves, it may fail to bring the desired effect since the question might be formulated in such a way that it will not require the students to express their points of view and they will instead be tempted to simply reproduce plagiarized materials. This problem can be partially addressed if we carefully design the assignment, although it does not entirely exclude cases of cheating. Let us, for example, compare the questions given to students before they started working on the text from H.-G. Gadamer's 'Truth and Method': *'What does it mean 'to understand a text'? What do you do to understand the texts you read?'* and '*What methods of reading help us understand texts better?*' The answer to the second question can be found on-line, it does not problematize the notion of 'understanding' and does not stimulate students to evoke their personal practical knowledge.

Reflexive meta-cognitive writing focuses on the content and methodology of the class. The question is formulated to concentrate the audience's attention on what happened during the class and why, the main topics and problems, their personal

experience in comprehending these topics. The task usually takes about 10 minutes and a part of the text can be read aloud. The instructor can use his or her own piece of meta-cognitive writing to summarize the results of the seminar.

> This method is aimed at developing students' skill of self-reflection, their ability to critically assess the knowledge they have acquired. A meta-cognitive writing task in its simplest form is writing an answer to the question about what seemed easier for them to grasp from the text they read in class. More complex forms at advanced levels may involve questions about their changing perceptions of the main problems the text addresses, their interpretations of the key concepts from the text. Unfortunately, since this activity is usually reserved for the end of the class, we do not always find the time for it if other activities took longer than expected.

To practice *focused (or close) reading,* each student is given a copy of the text and an assignment (to highlight the key words and unknown terms, to underline metaphors, to find references to a certain process or phenomenon, to write down their emotional reactions to the text on the margins, and so on). Close reading of the text (unlike the skimming technique aimed at finding out the main idea of the text or scanning for specific detail) enables students to gain a deeper and more precise understanding of the text in all its complexity. Close reading can be combined with other methods of reading in order to focus students' attention on a certain problem, which makes it particularly productive: for instance, a close reading task can be followed by a visualization task, a task to draw a text diagram or to identify the key ideas for further discussion.

> We apply this method each time our students work with a philosophical text. It should be noted that instead of highlighting certain fragments and writing notes on the copy of the text, students may be asked to do this task on a separate sheet of paper in case they have to share the copy with their groupmates.

The above-described methods of reading can be supplemented by *other techniques and strategies*, for instance, the instructor may ask students to read the text from the end to the beginning, read only randomly chosen fragments (for example, a student may be asked to take up reading where the previous student has stopped), recite the text, read it with different intonations, change the reading speed, or to practice chorus reading. These ways are effective if the instructor wants to attract additional attention to the text or specific images, to help students take a fresher look at the text, or to

relieve their reading anxiety. These methods also help students get closer to texts that may seem monolithic and intimidating.

> It should be noted that students' reactions to such activities can be quite ambivalent: some perceive them as a welcome distraction and a way to relax, while others are suspicious of these tasks and consider them a waste of time. Whatever initial reaction these tasks trigger, we have always managed to focus students' attention back to the text, especially to the passages which they previously gave but a fleeting glance. We use these methods from time to time to 'spice up' the seminar, for example, when a format change is needed as the group has grown tired and needs extra motivation.

For *visualization,* students are divided into several groups and draw illustrations for the same text fragment. The illustration can take any form, for example, it can be a picture of Plato's Cave or St. Augustine's palace of memory or a concept map, showing the connections between the concepts used by the author. At the following stage, student groups exchange their drawings and write comments or questions to others' works (these can be written on paper stickers and attached to the illustration), then each group defends their project and answers the questions. A metaphor can be represented graphically in the form of a picture the same way as a line of reasoning within a text can be illustrated with the help of a map or a diagram. In any case, this task requires repeated re-reading and stimulates a more attentive attitude to details, it also helps students to master alternative reading methods, and thanks to the game it keeps them more motivated and engaged when working with source texts.

> Since not all philosophical texts are suitable for visualization and not all texts that can be 'visualized' fit within the range of topics specified by the syllabus, we normally manage to conduct only one or two visualization activities in a semester. It should be noted that students find these tasks particularly inspiring and enjoyable (which can, however, be said about any kind of group work): they appreciate the opportunity of drawing together, adding more and more new details to the picture, and proudly present their projects, comparing them with the works of other groups. This method encourages students to unleash their creative potential and proves to be a refreshing break from the more conventional kinds of academic work. Difficulties may arise at the stage when students need to exchange questions, comments and assess the work of others. They may be unwilling or find it difficult to ask questions or make comments. Sometimes they are reluctant to voice their opinions because

they believe that their criticism might hurt the feelings or result in a lower grade of their groupmates.

Another technique involves *creating a diagram of the text.* Students are divided into small groups to read the same text, marking the key points and main ideas. Then each group is asked to draw a diagram on an A4 paper sheet mapping the author's line of reasoning. The students need to mark not only the sequence of the author's ideas, but also any digressions, gaps or inconsistencies. After that, each group reports back the results of their work to the rest of the class, who can comment and ask questions. The purpose of this method is to develop students' capacity to recognize the logical structure in a text, to better comprehend the argument, to be able to detect any logical fallacies, and evaluate the argument's strength and conclusiveness. Then, students in groups practice developing optimal graphic forms for presentation of their results to the audience.

> Unlike visualization, this method is suitable for working with any texts (not only philosophical) and provides plenty of opportunities for work in a group setting. However, it requires students to stay focused and to practice their skills of abstract thinking. This method can be applied either systematically (at the initial stage, students can practice creating diagrams for text fragments with a clear, coherent chain of reasoning and at more advanced stages, work with bigger and more complex texts) or selectively for specific groups, for instance, Master's or PhD students. At the stage of reporting to the whole group, however, students tend to refrain from criticizing the works of others (a similar situation to the one we already described above).

For *peer reviewing,* students are offered to read a text or a text fragment and write down a sentence summarizing the main idea of the text and then formulate their arguments for or against this idea. Afterwards, the group is divided into pairs of students, who exchange their notes and write comments to them. Then each pair reads aloud the key points of their notes. This method may be effective in teaching students to infer the main idea of the text, to articulate their opinion and provide arguments to support it.

> We use peer reviewing regularly and this task often serves as a kind of transition from group work to individual work, which requires reading for depth rather than breadth. Students are generally quite eager to work in pairs although at the reporting stage, some part of the audience might get bored since it is more interesting to speak themselves than to listen to others.

It may also be helpful to clarify what constitutes an argument and what types of arguments exist before students start to work in pairs.

The above types of tasks can be used in different combinations within one seminar or within one course, they can also serve as home assignments. For instance, a seminar may include free focused writing, followed by focused reading, visualization and, finally, reflexive meta-cognitive writing. One can think of at least two ways of organizing instruction with the help of these kinds of tasks: going from easier to more challenging tasks or going from team work to pair work and then to individual tasks. In any case, the principle of increasing difficulty must take precedence over other principles.

3.2. Students' Feedback

We have been teaching this course for several years. At the end of the spring semester of 2018/2019 academic year, we collected some feedback from our students to assess their level of satisfaction. The responses were anonymous and were written in a free form: we asked the students to indicate what they liked and disliked about the seminars, and what activities seemed particularly interesting to them. Overall, we received more than a hundred responses. The analysis of the feedback can lead us to some preliminary conclusions as to what the majority of students evaluate positively and what they like least of all.

The vast majority of students enjoyed the tasks involving team work, in particular text visualization. Most students pointed out that they liked discussions since many of them really appreciated the opportunity to be heard. The students' ability to articulate their point of view was enhanced by the methods of free focused writing and reflexive meta-cognitive writing. Some students also mentioned that they had improved their argument skills.

In most comments, students emphasized the importance of being able to express their opinions (we are quoting the most typical replies with the authors' style, spelling and punctuation preserved): 'It felt nice that each of your answers was always heard and considered valuable'; 'I liked that in every class we had an opportunity to speak'; 'what appealed to me most is the tasks which encourage you to speak about what you liked about the text or to express your point of view'; 'the instructor's non-judgmental attitude was crucial to me'. Students perceived communication with their peers as emotionally engaging and necessary for their personal development and academic performance: 'interactive classes develop your team work skills and make us feel closer to each other'; 'we worked on the problem together, which made it much more interesting and efficient

than when you are working on your own'; 'I liked the seminars with team work most of all because this way we found out each other's opinions, could expand our outlook and simply get a better grade'.

Almost all of the students write about their personal experience of working in a team but only a few mentioned their experience of working with philosophical texts. Some are quite critical about the choice of texts: 'it seems to me that the texts should be more relevant to the challenges of our time. For example, I liked 'The Beauty Myth' better than Pierre Abelard's text'; 'some texts were too difficult to understand'; 'old texts are sometimes almost incomprehensible'; 'I wish our course of philosophy focused only on European philosophy'. On the other hand, students also described the procedures which, in their view, helped them develop their skills: 'conversations that involved formulating questions to the text and their discussion were very productive because this way we could identify the key problems in the text'; '...working with the text improves your memory and flexible thinking, helps you find what is most important in the text and accept any opinion, even if it is not always clearly expressed'; 'many texts challenge you to think about the questions raised by the author'; and 'working on the text and finding the key ideas...enabled us to develop our argumentation skills, which is very important in the modern world'.

As for the negative impressions, the students most often complained about the lack of time for doing the tasks (in particular the lack of time for free discussions), about having to speak in public and the difficulties posed by particular texts. Rigorous time management is needed when working with large groups of students. The most time-consuming parts of activities are usually those when the whole group reconvenes to listen to individual students or smaller groups report their results. We also faced a severe lack of time for collective discussions of the texts and for quick spontaneous exchanges of ideas. Being aware of the fact that not all students are ready to read their reflections to the whole group, we allow them to submit their answers in a written form. Interestingly enough, the situation when one of us temporarily abandoned her attempts to get shy students talking during the seminar resulted in complaints about having to listen to the same people all the time. This problem can be partially solved by dividing students into small groups, which means that students will have more opportunities to choose the forms of engagement they prefer.

4. Discussion

While methods of reading and writing in liberal arts education are supposed to be targeted at developing students' critical thinking skills and encouraging independent thinking, in this paper we will refrain from assessing how efficient these methods are in reaching these goals. First, in order to do so, we need to apply these methods together with other elements of liberal arts education. For example, if we give students freedom to express themselves only occasionally, that is, such freedom is not inherent in the whole education trajectory offered by a specific university, we cannot say that the atmosphere at the university is conducive to independent thinking. Second, the analysis of writing and reading methodology guides as well as consultations with our more experienced colleagues have shown that our assessment of how students' skills developed throughout the course was always subjective. Third, the very notion of 'critical thinking' and methods of its assessment in higher education are not finalized and call for further elaboration. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has launched a project to 'build an international community of practice around teaching, learning and assessing creativity and critical thinking in HEIs'. The OECD researchers are planning to look into how institutions are currently fostering and assessing these skills. The international report on this topic will be published in 2021 [15].

Despite all the above advantages, when we adopted the new methodology, we encountered a number of difficulties, which can also be described as communication gaps. First, students are more interested in expressing their own thoughts rather than hearing the opinions of others. It is, however, the intention to listen to others that is essential for starting and maintaining a productive discussion, which students themselves consider as the key element of classroom communication. It should be noted that implementation of a culture of discussion in our classrooms entails a certain effort on the part of the instructor. Secondly, most students prefer teamwork rather than individual assignments, since the latter are perceived as more complex. Individual tasks are more closely connected to the content of the philosophical texts. While doing them, students are confronted with a sole but difficult interlocutor - the author of the philosophical work himself. Nevertheless, individual work holds a number of advantages in comparison with team work: it stimulates students to read in-depth and to articulate their position independently, without resorting to prompts from their peers. It should be noted that it is this opportunity to express their thoughts that students described as an important part of their philosophy seminars. We believe that these difficulties stem from the large size

of the student groups and from the fact that methods of writing were applied separately from those of reading.

5. Conclusion

At our philosophical seminars, we sought to bridge the gap in communication between teacher and student and to reconsider the balance of knowledge and power in the university class. The methods of reading and writing adopted in the liberal arts education system have allowed our students to express their opinions on philosophical texts in classroom discussions and in writing.

These methods bring to light the diversity of perspectives and teach students to defend their opinions and formulate questions. Therefore, the question 'What is the author's main idea?' in our classes was replaced by such questions as 'What idea, in your view, is the most debatable and why?'; 'Which phrase is the key to understanding the whole text and why?'; and 'Which of your groupmates' comments helped you understand the text better and why?' Any commentary on the text is considered valuable if it is reasoned.

In our discussion of these methods, we sought to demonstrate how they can be used to overcome the teacher-student communication gap. These methods encourage students to share their personal impressions from the text and to evoke their individual experiences to interpret it. Most of the work is done with small text fragments, which are easier for the instructor to handle, for example, to relate their content to students' experiences. The methods of reading and writing allow us to engage even the most reluctant students and to keep struggling students working. The diversity of tasks makes the whole methodology quite flexible - it can be adapted to the needs of specific groups, keeping them motivated when working with difficult philosophical texts.

Despite certain limitations, as students' feedbacks demonstrate, the methodology was quite effective in helping them feel empowered and be truly involved in classroom work. As a result, they were not afraid to approach new texts and were not put off by these texts' difficulty. Students appreciated the fact that their arguments were valued on their own merits rather than because they met a certain standard (for example, the perspective of the textbook) or agreed with the teacher's point of view. Our seminars required more time for discussion, which is a sign that we are on the way to creating a non-hierarchical horizontal modes of communicating in the classroom. To initiate these changes, we had to leave behind the already existing notions that the student should

learn from the text, how he or she should answer the instructor's questions and what the written conclusion should be after the student has analyzed the text.

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