Co-creative teaching practice and active learning: the opportunity of small group teaching in philosophy

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Abstract

Co-creative pedagogy practices, where the students occupy a central role in shaping the sessions acting as partners in teaching, have an enormous potential in fostering inclusiveness and equality in the academic setting. Giving the students a voice and a role to play in designing and delivering teaching interventions, indeed, ensures that their unique interests and their needs as learners are taken on board, valued, and acted upon. Yet, it is challenging to implement co-creative practice while also following principles of active learning. Engaging students in deep learning through activities and "doing" tasks usually requires a certain degree of preparation which ends up creating a structure for the sessions that is less flexible than hoped, and more difficult to be permeated by and open to students' individual needs and interests.

In teaching seminars in philosophy, I have found myself juggling the challenge of combining co-creative practice and active learning principles. Considering philosophy more as a practice rather than a discipline, I have always thought to my seminars as the ideal space for my students to exercise philosophical skills whose development, strength and autonomy constitute a core element of the learning expected from a philosophy graduate. For this reason, active learning has always been a pillar of my teaching practice. Yet, I was finding difficult to connect it to a co-creative approach to teaching.

In this piece, I am going to explain how establishing an ongoing, honest dialogue with my students has revealed to be the solution to my problem.

Keywords: co-creative practice, active learning, seminar teaching, GTA pedagogical practice, teaching philosophy

Introduction

Co-creative teaching practice, such as the one employed at the University of
Warwick to create resources targeted to incoming arts and humanities students
(Woods & Homer 2021), gives a voice and a central role to students to play in
seminars and classes. At the core of this approach to teaching, there is the idea that
students can act as partners in creating learning resources and shaping classes,
seminars, and lab sessions. Giving a central role to students in shaping sessions
and teaching materials, co-creative teaching practice has an enormous potential to
foster inclusiveness and equality in pedagogical spaces. Giving the chance to
students to act as partners in designing and shaping seminars and classes, indeed,
ensures that students' unique learning interests and needs are considered, and
acted upon.

However, I found it challenging to implement a co-creative approach to teaching in
my practice while also following principles of active learning. Active learning is
generally taken to be the acquisition of new knowledge through active engagement
(see Konopka et al. 2015, Freeman at al. 2014, Gibbs 1988) with new concepts,
practices, and information. In active learning, students, doing something, acquire
new information about the world, and their discipline. Active learning is considered as
a desirable learning method since it is thought to lead to deep learning (see Marton
and Saljo 1976), namely a type of learning that allows students not just to remember
information but also creatively and critically employ their newly acquired knowledge.

To foster active engagement in my seminars, I tend to create tasks and exercises
that prompt my students to do something regarding the new concepts, and
information that they are encountering. I ask them to evaluate views, consider cases,
judge situations, rate theories and so on. I want my students to be in the position to
be active agents who can tackle problems and engage critically with what is
presented to them in our sessions.

Yet, the creation of tasks and activities that can prompt active engagement which
can then lead to deep learning requires a level of structure that initially prevented my

sessions to be more open, sensible, and receptive of my students' individual needs and interests. Creating activities and exercises, accurately and carefully planning my seminars, was leading to sessions that presented a rigid structure which prompted active engagement but was difficult to adapt on the basis of the individual uniqueness of people involved.

In this paper, I am going to explain how I changed my teaching practice by implementing a co-creative approach in teaching seminars in the Department of Philosophy at University of Warwick without renouncing to active learning principles and practices. I am going to explain how this change was prompted by feedback that I received from a teaching observation, the analysis of the results of a mid-term and a final term survey and a positive referee experience. I am going to conclude showing that the solution of my case was embedded in the concept of co-creation and concerned the ability of keeping an open ongoing dialogue with my students.

Initial way of planning and leading seminars in philosophy

Teaching practice in philosophy are based on scholars' individual understanding of what philosophy is. Different academics, scholars and philosophers can hold quite different views regarding what philosophy is and what it should aim at. Clearly, a different understanding of the nature of the discipline, its aims, as well as its methods deeply impacts pedagogical interventions, methods, and goals.

To explain my pedagogical practice in philosophy is then helpful to say from the start that I consider philosophy more as a practice than a discipline. This means that in my teaching I am strongly concerned about facilitating my students' acquisition of skills that enable them to *do* something in addition of guiding them to access new information. The acquisition of familiarity with philosophical literature and debates (see point 1 below) that I would like my students to enjoy is aimed and oriented, in my practice, at the development of their ability of exercising, doing, practicing philosophy (see point 2 below). In other words, in teaching seminars in the Department of Philosophy, I am usually guided by two main aims:

> 1) familiarise my students with philosophical literature and debates – in philosophy a type of knowledge defined as "knowing-that",

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2) facilitate my students' practice and exercise of philosophical skills such as critical thinking, formulation of arguments, ability to close read philosophical papers and many more - in philosophy a type of knowledge defined as "knowing-how" (Pavese 2021).

Ideally, I would like my students to become rigorous, independent thinkers able to consider views, arguments, debates, and objections engaging critically, and questioning their formal aspects and their contents.

In order to pursue my teaching goals, I usually implement active learning practices. I want my students to exercise their skills and abilities to get better at doing philosophy, doing it together, with other students and with me. For this reason, I try my best to create a welcoming, positive, friendly environment in my seminars which could allow my students to feel safe in expressing themselves and their views. I praise my students for their contributions and notice how their thoughts can prompt even more interesting discussions on topics at hand. In case of a misunderstanding of the readings or lectures' materials, I turn the situation into an opportunity to clarify philosophical views. In doing so, everyone has the opportunity to grow. I also significantly employ small-groups and pairs work which allow students to feel less under pressure than having to present, report or engage with the entire seminar group.

Furthermore, I design activities and tasks centred on the materials chosen by the module leader, that can prompt reflections, debate and discussion and can feel fun and engaging from my students. I employ activities such as debates, live Vevox polls and Q&A, conceptual treasure hunts, peer-to-peer presentations, poster crafting and philosophical bingos. It has been observed that active involvement (Konopka et al. 2015, Freeman at al. 2014, Gibbs 1988), in pedagogical and learning settings, can lead to a deeper learning (see Marton and Saljo 1976) experience which allows students to better retain information, critically engage and develop their personal knowledge.

Guided by the same goals that I outlined at the beginning of this section, I also promote opportunities of fostering peer-to-peer learning (Assinder 1991) creating

instances for my students to dialogue with their peers and assess each other's presentations and contributions. This type of practice has the advantage to make my students actively engage with philosophical debates and materials from a first-person perspective. It also helps them to develop their autonomy in both understanding and engaging with philosophical views and debates. Furthermore, it also takes away the pressure from them of being assessed and judged by me as a teaching assistant.

In concrete terms, to prepare for seminars, I usually design activities and tasks around the reading and the lectures materials provided and chosen by the module leader. I make it clear from the beginning of the seminars how the activities, that I am asking my students to engage with, are intended to create an opportunity to acquire, practice and exercise skills that are essential for both practising philosophy in more general terms and perform well in their exams. I also explain the link between the activities I created for the seminar and the specific skill that each of them aims at developing and practicing.

I collect all the exercises I created for a session in a handout which provides both information about how to carry out the activities and the reasons for which I designed them. I make sure to distribute the handout in advance of each seminar, avoiding taking people by surprise and making them feel unease during our sessions. The early distribution of the handout also helps those students that prefer accessing the seminar materials in a digital form due to various reasons including specific learning needs or other accessibility issues.

Below you can see a two extracts coming from two different handouts which I designed respectively for a seminar for a first-year module, and a seminar for a second- and third-year module. From a visual perspective, I always make sure that handouts provide manageable questions, and enough empty spaces for my students to write down their notes and replies. Psychological research has proved, indeed, that testing students on the knowledge acquired (e.g., asking them to write down what they can recall) increases the ability to remember those contents (Roediger III

& Karpicke (2006)). Thus, I make sure that the materials that I create for the sessions maximise the benefits that my students can get from seminars including spaces for notes and written reflections.

The first extract below concerns a task structured around an online poll where I asked my students to rate philosophical theories of perception on the base of how convincing they sounded. I then asked my students to work in small groups and comment on the results. I provided a series of questions (point a,b,c,d,e,f in the picture) that could help students reflecting on the results of the poll to kick out the discussion in the small groups. The handout presents an initial QR code to the Vevox poll, proceeded by a short explanation of what the poll consisted of. After the QR code, I wrote a couple of lines of instructions regarding the small group work. I finally listed a series of questions (from a) to f)) which invited students to reflect on few, specific aspects of the theories and I included some empty lines where students could write their notes and replies.

The second extract that I include below presents a task which concerns an in-class presentation. The handout presents a couple of lines where I initially explained which skills the task was aimed at developing, such as the abilities of close reading a paper, recognising concepts, presenting philosophical concepts clearly, and so on. Following the explanation concerning the targeted skills, the handout presents a couple of lines with instructions regarding the task, namely the request of reading carefully a passage of the philosophical text provided by the seminar tutor and discuss with peers how to present the passage to the rest of the group. In the handout, I finally provided some written questions to help my students shaping their presentations and some suggestions about how to assess other groups' work.

Visually, I made sure to leave some empty lines where my students could write notes, replies and reflections.

Week 4 – Seminar 3 - Module: Making Decisions

Transformative Choice

Task 1 – Presenting a Paragraph Competition – group work + class presentation – 10 + 15 minutes

Why ?: develop the skills of close reading a paper, recognising concepts, presenting them clearly, evaluating if and when a presentation is clear and effective

Task: your group receives an extract from the paper, read it carefully and then present it to the rest of the class

Preparation: organise your presentation thinking that other people in the room did not have the chance to read your bit of text and taking into account the following questions:

What is the main idea/claim here?
_____
_____

Is there an essential concept that is very important for the understanding of this bit of text and needs a clear explanation? What is it? How would you explain it in your own words?
_____
_____

Can you put your paragraph in the context of the entire paper? What is the function of this specific bit? Where it appears and why?
_____
_____

Evaluation: Take into account the same questions outlined above to decide which groups you want to vote for the best presentation. Remember that clarity and effectiveness should be the main parameters for your choice

Reminder about other pieces of the paper:

Scenario = A couple who has no children sit down and think about the idea of having one. They can choose to either have a baby or not have a baby

Mary's story = Mary is a person who grew up closed inside a black and white room. She knows everything about colours under any possible physical description, but she has never experienced a colour before

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I usually design three or four different activities for each seminar. So, the handouts usually look like a series of three or four tasks. The expected duration for the activities is purely indicative and just helps me structure the sessions. I tend to explain all the activities at the beginning, linking them to the skills that are intended to help developing, to allow my students to decide what they want to start with. I never aim to finish all the exercises that I prepare, especially considering that a seminar is just about an hour long.

However, I think there is a series of advantages in providing more than one option of tasks. Firstly, the variety of exercises give students the chance to decide among several options what they find more interesting and helpful to engage with. This allows space for at least a certain degree of engagement on their side in shaping the seminar making sure that their interests and needs are considered.

Secondly, this practice helps them to notice the main three or four points of the reading or lecture materials that I considered worth focusing on. Even if we do not engage together with all the elements that I considered important, the handout and the designed activities can lead them to reflect on the selection that I made on the contents of the weekly materials, giving them an example of how to engage with the readings. The activities highlight for them the main concepts, views, and objections that the materials present. They also guide students' engagement, structuring their interactions with the texts, and breaking down the issues in more manageable chunks, while still allowing space for their personal reflections.

Finally, I hope that providing a series of exercises that are meant to be enjoyable and able to prompt philosophical reflections could lead students to either engage further with the materials on their own following the suggested exercises or autonomously continue the conversations started inside our seminars still being somehow asynchronously guided.

Feedback

The positive

I have received a variety of positive feedback concerning my teaching practice through emails, in person conversations with students and module leaders, formal and informal observations carried out in the Department of Philosophy and a variety of surveys organised autonomously by myself, by the module leader or the Department.

In a survey I distributed, some students reported that they enjoyed the seminars for the level of engagement and interaction that the tasks I designed have imported into our session. Other students flagged how the activities I used helped them engaging

deeply with the philosophical views discussed and clarified the contents of the lectures.

Another student particularly praised the handouts for their ability to highlight, through exercises and tasks, the main points of the reading materials. For the same reason, someone else also wrote that the handouts have been a useful tool not just during the seminars where they prompted lively debates, but also for the phase of revision since they constituted a basic summary of what was discussed. Someone else emailed me asking if it was possible for me to circulate the handouts outside my seminar groups since they came across them speaking with their peers and they found them useful.

In the end of term Departmental Survey, more than 80% of my students "definitely agreed" (5 over 5 points) with the statement that seminars helped them to understand the topics better and made the topics interesting [the rest, less than 20% "mostly agreed" – 4 points over 5]. The 90% "definitely agreed" (5 over 5 points) with the statement that seminars were well structured and prepared. Module leaders in different teaching observations also noticed that the activities that I designed allowed my students to deeply engage with the philosophical readings and prompted serious reasonings about the topics at hand. When asked to comment in particular on structures and exercises, they flagged them as "well crafted" and "perfect" to get students to reflect on the concepts, views and materials.

The negative

On the other hand, some students, module leaders and reviewers of my pedagogical reflections signalled a problem with the rigidity imported in my sessions by the structure of the seminars, the exercises and the tasks. Individual differences, in terms of learners' needs and desires, were emerging from my students and more flexibility was required to meet them. Some of my students were asking to receive more suggestions on a topic or another. In an anonymous survey, one of my students, for example, wrote that they wanted more guidance about how to construct

arguments. Another student said that they would have liked to engage with more close reading tasks. Furthermore, in submitting a piece of writing concerning my teaching practice, one of the referee wrote that the packed structure of my seminars could potentially prevent a more student-centred approach. Furthermore, they suggested to consider using less strict plans for my sessions allowing broader room for my students to shape our sessions.

Finally, a module leader I worked with, in a teaching observation, suggested I could allocate a more extended portion of time in the seminar to hear from students if they had any questions they wanted to rise or any points that they really wanted to discuss with their peers or with me.

Reflections and adaptations

In reflecting on my teaching practice, in light of the feedback that I received, a puzzle started emerging for me…

On one hand, I could appreciate a series of relevant positive aspects embedded in my teaching practice. Firstly, my way of approaching seminars seemed to have a positive impact on my students' learning experience. My handouts have received an impressive number of positive feedbacks especially recognising the support and help that they could provide in guiding students in engaging with the philosophical materials. Students were also reporting finding tasks and activities useful to deepen their knowledge and understanding. Secondly, tasks, activities and exercises have proved, in practice, to be useful tools to prompt discussion making of my seminars very lively session and allowing me to follow my pedagogical intention of actively engaging my students in philosophical discussions. Finally, designing tasks, activities and exercises has been of great help for me to set both philosophical and pedagogical goals for my seminars. On one hand, reflecting on the creation of activities prompted me to think about the philosophical concept, point or view that I wanted my students to familiarise with. On the other hand, designing an activity around a main philosophical point made me reflect on the pedagogical aim that I could embed in that activity such as, for example, prompt the exercise of close reading or the development of the ability of constructing a good argument.

On the other hand, however, I recognised a series of aspects that could be improved in my practice. A better student-centred approach could lead me to more inclusive sessions that could value students' uniqueness more. My students could feel more involved, seen and heard in their learning path creating an even more welcoming environment in the seminars. Furthermore, an enhanced degree of flexibility in designing and delivering seminars could create a space for my students to express their creativity and respect their specific needs and interests more deeply. Finally, a student-centred approach could allow my students to develop more autonomy as readers, writers, and thinkers. Giving them the chance to shape their sessions could make them take more responsibility on their educational path and become more self-reflective on what truly help them learn and grow.

Initially, adapting my teaching practice felt very difficult, if not impossible. I did not want to stop producing handout with tasks and activities that were recognised as so helpful and supportive and fitted my teaching style very nicely. At the same time, being keen in supporting inclusiveness and equality, I was committed to try developing and employing a better student-centred approach to teaching. Yet, the two aims looked in contrast to me and I was struggling in finding a way to combine them in the practice.

I reflected on my teaching aims, intentions, and practices for some days without reaching a satisfactory solution, until I did not recognise that the way out of the impasse was part of the student-centred approach itself. Entering my following seminar I opened a discussion with my students regarding the format, the structures, and the activities I was providing during seminars. I explained that I would have liked to make my seminars more inclusive, open, and receptive of their needs and interests. I also explained in the long run I would have liked them to become more autonomous thinkers able to engage with close reading tasks, to structure their arguments and recognise their point of interest and frictions with philosophical debates.

My seminar groups were very enthusiastic of being involved in the dialogue concerning the shaping of their seminars. At that point, I was working with second

and third-year students who were, at least in a certain extent, experienced in engaging in philosophical discussions and knowledgeable about seminar dynamics, practice and goals. Our conversations allowed me to come up with some practical solutions that we tried out together testing what was working better and what was less fitting for them.

The positive environment that I was initially keen in creating in my seminars for the benefit of my students' ability to serenely engage with their peers and me discussing philosophy, ended up being also a fantastic opportunity for me to involve them as active creators in my pedagogical efforts.

A renovated practice

The ongoing dialogue I established with my students has led me to a renovated practice. Now, I send to students in advance a series of very broad questions, intended to prompt the individuation and selection of main points of interest inside the materials. I ask them to consider which ideas, concepts, or arguments they would like to see explored inside the seminar. On the day of our session, I then allow them to choose what we are going to focus on.

In more details, I provide in advance of the seminars what I call "empty handouts", which usually display some boxes in which I ask students to list concepts, arguments, or views that they individuated in the reading and lecture materials or to reply to some very broad questions concerning those materials. This allows my students to reflect on both what the materials are about and what they want to focus their time and interest on. It also put them in the position to be the active agents in selecting and highlighting the main points, views, arguments, and objections present in the materials. Inside the seminars, I then ask them to share their selections, we discuss the choices that they made together, and we then decide together what we want to discuss further in terms of contents. Once we decide together what is going to be the main focus of the seminar, we think together how to implement an activity around it. The task can be just a small group-work aimed at revising and presenting to the whole seminar group different points of a view or its objections. In other cases,

we can establish a debate between small groups concerning the structure and understanding of a certain argument.

In this way, they do not miss out on the main aims of familiarising themselves with the literature and exercising philosophical skills. On one hand, they need to read through the materials and engage with the contents of the lecture to be able to fill in the "empty handout". On the other hand, there are exercising the ability of recognising crucial elements of a philosophical work, and the one of individuating weak and strong points of a view that they want to push or enlarge on. Inside the seminar, they exercise a higher grade of autonomy in deciding the focus while still being in the position to engage deeply with philosophical contents.

At the beginning of the introduction of this renovated practice, some students felt the need to ask for confirmations. They wanted to know what I would have picked if I prepared my handouts following my initial style. They wanted the reassurance that they were working philosophically in the right direction, and they also wanted to be comforted that there was a planned structure behind my sessions even though seminars have become more open and flexible. Yet, I did not want to step back in the progress of offering them a co-creative, more inclusive space and the opportunity to exercise their autonomy. Thus, what I ended up implementing has been a joint, mixed practice.

I distribute "empty handouts" in advance of the seminars, but I also create for myself a handout following my initial style. I work with "empty handout" and co-creative practice inside the seminars at the synchronous level. I then distribute, in case it is requested by students, and as late as possible in the seminar or even afterward, the handout designed following my initial style. This way students can still feel that they can eventually access a guided approach into the reading and lecture materials.

Below you can see two extracts: one from an "empty handout" and another from a handout for the same seminar that I designed following my initial style. They were employed in a seminar for a second- and third-year module.

The extract below, from the "empty handout", presents three questions which ask students to:

1) list the essential concepts of that week reading materials,

2) list which concepts among those are not clear,

3) list essential arguments and cases from the readings.

Visually, in the "empty handout", three blank boxes follow the questions and I leave plenty of space for comments and notes.

The extract from the handout which followed my initial style, instead, presents two different tasks. The first requires students to work in small groups and fill in a table explaining five essential concepts that I individuated in the reading materials intended for that week seminar. The second task is constituted by a series of questions regarding philosophical views and arguments presented by two different philosophers whose works were discussed in the lectures and the reading materials.

Week 9 – pre seminar tasks

Construct your ideal seminar for this weekly materials

replying to the following questions

1. Write below all the concept you think are essential to understand this week paper:

2. Write below all the concepts you think that are not very clear and you would like to discuss:

3. Write below a list of arguments/examples/cases or steps of the argument that are essential to understand this week paper:

The questions of the second task were intended to practice the ability of clearly presenting philosophical views and the ability to reconstruct the steps of an argument. Once more, I made sure to visually leave space in the handout for personal notes and comments.

Week 9 – pre seminar tasks - replies

Construct your ideal seminar for this weekly materials

replying to the following questions

Task 1 - Essential Concepts – try to explain in your own words:

Regret	
"Twice miserable"	
Agent regret	
Reasonable person in Bittner sense	
Identity as an agent in Bittner sense	

Task 2 - Reconstruct the passage of the following arguments:

What does Spinoza state about regret?

_____

Spinoza on regret:

5. _____
_____
6. _____
_____
7. _____
_____

What does Bernard Williams think about regret?

_____

What is the relation between Williams' idea and Bittner's idea?

_____

Conclusion

In this piece I started presenting my teaching practice which was initially centred around principles of active learning. I explained how active learning allowed me to reach my pedagogical goals and how I practically implemented it in teaching seminars in philosophy. I recognised, however, that helpful feedback that I received on several occasions prompted me to rethink my teaching practice in order to give a more central role to my students in their learning.

Based on that feedback, I then started considering how to implement a co-creative approach to teaching. Yet, I initially found difficult to engage students as active partners in shaping our seminars, while also continue to employ active learning strategies. I realised just after some reflections that the solution to my puzzle could be found in the co-creative practice itself. It was through establishing an ongoing, open and honest dialogue with my students that we formulated some possible solutions to the case. We tried out some of them together and we ended up keeping what was more suitable for them for the rest of the term.

In nominating me for a teaching award at the end of academic year, someone wrote that they appreciated my efforts in changing activities in my seminars and acting on feedback positively. I considered those lines as the confirmation that keeping an open dialogue with students, trying to understand their perspectives, and giving them the chance of playing an active role in shaping seminars was the right route to take.

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