Högskolepedagogisk introduktionskurs, HT-området, Ht14

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To Teach in Tandem

1. Introduction

This paper aims at highlighting a concrete problem of pedagogical nature; a problem that, I believe, is not uncommon. I will begin by giving a broad picture of how studies at my faculty are organized at introductory level, and gradually hone in on my own subject, to end up with a specific pedagogical problem. At my faculty an A-level introductory course is offered. Once upon a time this introductory course encompassed 60 credits (two semesters), but now it only encompasses 30 credits (one semester). The introductory course is supposed to cover all the various subjects, which are represented at the faculty, and does so by compartmentalizing them in discrete modules of various lengths. This gives my own subject, ethics, 5 credits, which are shared equally with philosophy of religion, i.e. 2,5 credits is what is allotted to each subject, in this joint module entitled "Philosophical and Ethical Perspectives on Religion". Together with the other modules, which cover subjects as varying as the history of Christianity, modern Islam, and sociology of religion, the introductory course aims to give a complete survey of religious studies. So far so good! The aim to give a broad introduction to an area of study seems reasonable for an introductory course, and a structure with discrete modules makes sense in that each subject has its own identity, and convention. Modules in particular make sense from a logistical perspective, since each subject has its own professor. To each his own as the saying goes. This if seen from the perspective of teacher and staff. We enter the classroom to do our well-rehearsed gig, and then we are off. Courses are however not a one person show, and that is how the probably not so uncommon pedagogical problem enters the picture.

The student that enrols for an introductory course in religious studies does so with anticipations and motivating interests. If someone has chosen an introductory course in religious studies, it seems reasonable that one wants to learn about religions or existential questions in general. If the student looks at the syllabus' general description of the content of the entire course, it says, with regards to ethics and philosophy, that the student will develop his or her ability to think critically on religion, faith and worldviews, with the help of theoretical and methodological tools gathered from philosophy and ethics. This situates the subjects of ethics and philosophy well within the confines of religious studies, and makes ethics and philosophy seem relevant to someone committed to the study of religion, faith and worldviews. Before the student begins on the module "Philosophical and Ethical Perspectives on Religion", she or he has been through a 15 credit module that deals with world religions as well as psychological and sociological perspectives on religion. After the student has finished the ethics and philosophy module, she or he will go through a 10 credit course that covers Christianity, past and present.

If we look to the specific learning goals listed in the syllabus, ethics and philosophy is mentioned only once, and then under the paragraph "knowledge and understanding", there it is stated that students shall be competent in identifying, and account for ethical, and philosophical perspectives on religion. Three things are to be noted here. First, philosophy

and ethics are only mentioned under the paragraph "knowledge and understanding". The subject is thus passed with silence in the two remaining paragraphs: "competence and skills", and "judgement and approach". Second, the "religion, faith and worldviews" from the general description of the course has been shortened to "religion". Third, it is unclear what happened to the "think critically" in the general course overview that in the learning goals for the course has been replaced with "identify", and "account for". The meaning and intention behind these changes of phrasing is unclear to me, and after some talk with a colleague I realized that I am not the only one who feels uncertain about these incongruences. Back to the students again, whom, if not before so at least at the introductory lecture, read the syllabus, and try to make out what is expected of them. It goes without saying that if the teacher feels unsure of the meaning of the syllabus the student will not be any wiser. There is thus a risk that a great deal of the students' energy will be wasted on trying to understand just what is expected of them, since certainty in these matters are what students generally look for.

As a teacher you have basically two things to fall back on, when you plan your lessons. First the syllabus, and second the reading list. If the syllabus is vague and offers poor guidance then the reading list becomes all the more important. For the 2,5 credits that are allotted to ethics, the reading list have James Rachels' *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* as mandatory reading. It is a nice little book of 203 pages, and offers exactly what the title promises, an introduction to moral philosophy. The only problem is that the course is not an introductory course in moral philosophy, but on ethical and philosophical perspectives on religion. The book does deal with ethics and religion, in one chapter which is 13 pages long. What is discussed there is a philosophically interesting question, namely if morality presupposes religion. At the end of this chapter the author summarizes his conclusion thus, "morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not religious faith; and in any case, religious considerations do not provide definite solutions to most of the moral problems that we face".[1] The book's remaining 190 pages deal with various moral theories, such as utilitarianism, deontology, and the ethics of care. This is the material that is to be covered in six lectures, and one seminar. Perhaps the teacher can devote one lecture as well as the seminar to the 13 pages, which deals with ethics and religion, but the remaining five lectures will have to cover the book's remaining 190 pages. Thus, there is a clear discrepancy between the stated learning goals and what can be learnt by doing the mandatory reading.

At this point I hope the pedagogical problem I announced, in the beginning of this paragraph, is coming into focus. The goal of the module within the course is not entirely clear, neither is it clear how this particular module relates to the content learned in previous modules and what will be learned in future modules. It is not that a teacher or a student won't form a conception of what is supposed to be covered within the module. It is rather that any such conception will have to be based on ideas affected by other sources than the syllabus, which in and by itself gives little and even contradictory guidance. This situation is aggravated by a reading list that in no obvious way relates to the learning goals of the syllabus that in our case is, "to be able to identify and account for different behavioural, ethical and philosophical perspectives on religion". As teachers we are charged with making the pedagogical decisions, which make these learning goals materialize in actual student performance.

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[1] Rachels, J. (2010). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 6th ed. McGrave-Hill: Boston. p. 61. Rachels is with all probability right in his final analysis (at least that is the majority view among professional philosophers and I stand with them) but even so the general tone in his conclusion is at odds with the stated learning goal of the course since Rachels implies that ethics and religion are totally unrelated. If so, then why study ethics in this course?

I will begin by briefly discussing a utopian solution to this problem, which would require revising the very way courses are made. I will then look at non-utopian ways to deal with the situation as it is, i.e. how to give the students a good learning experience, despite us not living in the best of worlds. Section three will use insights from pedagogical research in an attempt to make something constructive of what is inherently problematic from a pedagogical perspective; namely a lack of coherence and focus in the total learning experience.

2. *The Optimal solution in a utopian academe*

In the best of all academes every course would sail under the right flag. General course descriptions would be informative enough to give a good estimate of what material will be covered in each course and learning goals would perfectly mirror the things stated in the general descriptions. Courses consisting of modules would be logically structured so that each module broadened and deepened the knowledge which the student had acquired in the previous module and each module would prepare the student for what were to come in the next. Courses would be coherent and focused wholes that by their structure helped the student organize and systematize the total content of a course and gradually encourage the student to question that very structure. To do this would however require that faculties made the students learning experience paramount to the interests of particular subjects. It would require that teachers thought about courses as wholes and not as compartmentalized, where everyone guard his or her own interest as ethicists, Old Testament scholars or historians of world religions. The courses would be the primary units and individual subjects of importance only to the extent they would contribute to the student's total learning experience. The result would be that the students became accomplished generalists before they became specialists, and it would make their time as students that much longer and our way of working in the academy that much different. But since we are in Utopia this would not be a problem; student loans, limited life spans and resource allocation would not be issues with which we had to deal.

3. *Solutions of a non-utopian kind*

There are no utopian academes, but steps can still be taken towards if not the best so at least a better academe. For this to happen we need coordination, and focus in the overall structure and comprehensibility in the sequence, and manner in which various subjects are introduced. Students must be able to both see and feel that the different subjects relate to one another in ways beyond just being different things that they have to go through to complete the course, and get their final grade. The reason for why focus and coordination are important is that they facilitate and increase the quality of students' learning. Why this is so and how it can be done will be discussed in connection with results from pedagogical research relating to student motivation, and how students learn and memorize.

3.1 Motivation

Within psychology motivation is defined as "behaviour that seems purposeful and goal directed",[2] and undertaking studies at an academic level seems to eminently fit into that description. Yet, lack of motivation is not unheard of as a problem among our students. There are certainly many causes as to why the motivation that made the student fill in the application for our introductory course seems so depleted at my lecture, but I would like to focus on only one possible cause. When the student filled in the application, he or she dreamt of studying world religions, while he or she in my course is confronted with an exclusively western and secular discourse, marred by Anglo-Saxon philosophical jargon. It is nothing

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[2] Kolb, B., Whishaw I. Q., (2005). *An Introduction to Brain and Behaviour*, 2nd ed. Worth: New York. p.390

wrong with it, it is interesting and important and I like it, but the student doesn't. Might it be that the student, which had intrinsic motivation when seeking the course, has switched to extrinsic motivation, when confronted with my subject? Intrinsic motivation is a motive to do something because it is found to be rewarding in itself (e.g. to learn about world religions), and extrinsic motivation is motivation to learn in order to achieve something else (e.g. to finish the course to get on with what is found intrinsically motivating).[3] Given how students choose to progress with their education, it seems reasonable to assume that not so few of the students we encounter in the introductory course are there because they are intrinsically motivated to study a subject other than the one we happen to teach. No matter how enthusiastic we feel about our own particular subject, all students won't be swayed to see the value of our particular discipline the same way we do; as a matter of statistical fact the majority won't.

The question now is if there is a way to help those interested in world religions to find a value in the study of ethics, and vice versa, i.e. can we make students more than grade oriented in their approach, without making them devote acolytes to our own subject? If we look at the results from a recent review of research made in expectancy-value theory for achievement motivation, the answer seems to be a clear yes.[4] The effort made to learn a material or succeed on a test is causally linked to a student's mastery goals, and performance goals, which predict both course performance, career intentions, and academic aspirations. These goals are in their turned determined by two main factors, the perceived value of the task, and the felt self-efficacy in completing it. We might be used to ease the students' anxieties for the exam, and thus increase their sense of self-efficacy, but what about the other component? Are we making it equally possible for all to see a value in the learning tasks? Probably not!

McKeachie's guide for teaching in higher education underscores, in relation to motivational research, the importance of making the students see a purpose in what they are learning, i.e. to understand the why.[5] As it happens, we already know one of the purposes of them being there, namely that they take a special interest in some particular religion(s) or some other phenomena related to faith(s), religion(s), and worldview(s). Therefore, besides trying to show why our particular subject is interesting in its own right, a straight road to a connection to students' motivation is to try to show how our subject relates to the other subjects, one of which motivated them to apply for the course. Speaking from personal experience, as well as anecdotal testimony, one reason we often fail to be motivated to engage a material in a course is that we don't see how it connects to the things we are interested in. We could help students see such connections by actively engaging material they have encountered in previous courses, and will encounter in later courses, but doing so from the vantage point of our own particular subject. There is no reason whatsoever why a student primarily interested in world religions should not feel engaged by the material covered in ethics or vice versa. But the students often need help to see from what vantage point one must look to see those connections, which for someone acquainted with both might be glaringly obvious. It has to be covered and demonstrated to them and this brings me to the next pedagogical principle.

3.2 In my domain

[3] Svinicki, M. D. & McKeachie, W. J. (2014). *McKeachie's Teachings Tips*. Wadsworth: Belmont, CA. p.141.

[4] Plate, I., O'Keefe, P. A. O., Théorêt, M. (2013). The relation between achievement goal and expectancy-value theories in predicting achievement-related outcomes: A test of four theoretical conceptions. *Motivation & Emotion*. 37. pp. 65-78.

[5] Svinicki, M. D. & McKeachie, W. J. (2014). McKeachie's Teachings Tips. Wadsworth: Belmont, CA. p. 148.

It is known that humans acquire competence to memorize, and systematize within specific domains.[6] It has been shown in a host of experiments done by psychologists that the human brain, (a) spontaneously tries to categorize information, and (b) that memory is improved or hampered depending on if categorization of a material is inhibited or promoted in the way it is presented.[7] It is consequently not for nothing, that we have a much easier time reading and remembering the content of an article within our own field, than we have reading an article describing an unknown subject. Within the domains we master, we have acquired ways to systematize, and organize, which aid learning, and facilitate retention. When students are confronted with a new area of study they most likely have no domain specific competence, which helps them systematize, and organize new information. Associative learning can therefore initially only be facilitated by forming what McKeachie calls "indirect relations". We might for example say to our students that Eid al-Fitr is a Muslim Christmas, to give them a sense of the nature of that particular holiday, as a time for family, food, and feast. Such a technique might help the students get an understanding of the festive nature of that particular holiday, and relate it to something that is already known, and they remember it by categorizing the new phenomenon together with western Christmas celebrations. A better way to learn would of course be to use "direct relations" in which case the student would place Eid al-Firth within the context of the Muslim calendar, where it makes sense in relation to the Ramadan rather than as an analogy to Christmas. Particularly as Muslims do believe in the virgin birth of Jesus but don't have a holiday which celebrates the event. Yet lacking an understanding of the structure of the Muslim calendar, students need some way to categorize, and a less than perfect way can be better than no way. This said as an oversimplified example to illustrate a general pedagogical principle.

So how does this relate to how we teach in our different modules? Should I go for direct association learning by giving out as much facts as needed for students to form complete sets of proper domain specific expertise? Should I cram the entire metaphysics of Kant into their heads so they can form proper associations between his critique of practical reason and his metaphysics of morals? In god's good time the answer is probably yes, but for an introductory course the answer is most likely no. There is simply no time to teach the student all the material needed to get an expert's way of sorting, and memorizing domain specific content. However, there are meta-categories which overlap the different course modules, and could serve well as rough steps towards mastering domain specific competence. A student might not be able to get a full understanding of Kant's philosophy, but a student could well learn to relate Kant's thinking as encountered in the ethics module to Ibn Rushd's rationalism as encountered in the study of Islam module. A student might not get a full grasp of the virtue ethics of Aristotle in its own terms, but it would greatly aid memory to be able to relate Aristotle's doctrine of *Arete* to the *Dharma* of the Hindus, the *Virtus* of medieval Christendom and the *Akhlaq* of Islamic philosophy. Each of these terms are historically related and understanding any one of them in their own right is a daunting task, but it seems there would be less of free floating words to remember if the student is taught to memorize them as a related group of concepts; i.e. to learn the student to see family semblances among what would else appear as unrelated pieces of information.

3.3 The mother of all knowledge

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[6] Ibid. p. 295.

[7] Goldstein, B. E. (2008). *Cognitive Psychology* 2nd ed. Thomson: Belmont, CA. pp. 204-206.

Finally we come to the mother of all knowledge, namely repetition. In the psychological literature it is even called "the major mechanism of consolidation".[8] As the introductory course is organized presently, the modules follow each other not as related, but as atomically isolated. Each module is encountered as unconnected to the previous, and next. You thus learn in order to forget, or rather you learn in order to retrieve for one exam, and then be on to the next module where what you have just learned will appear useless. You are never asked to remember what you have learned or look ahead to what you will learn. Yet it is well known that repetition has a tremendous impact on long term memory. If we think it is a problem that the students remember so little of what they newly learned on the introductory course, it might be that we have never encouraged them to rehearse their acquired knowledge. An integrated approach would encourage the student to call to mind rather than to forget, and the effect on long term memory would be beneficial. The kind of rehearsal we would ideally like is elaborative rehearsal as opposed to maintenance rehearsal. The latter is what we get when we memorize lists or names for retrieval within a few days, e.g. for an exam. The former is what we get when we are encouraged to store to long term memory by elaborating, and think of the meaning of a term, as well as trying to form connections between it and what we already know.[9] This kind of rehearsal could be achieved if students were encouraged (and sometimes forced) to actively engage material from other modules than the one they are presently studying.

4. Conclusion

This short paper has discussed the problem of lacking coherence and focus in teaching, and the resulting suboptimal learning experience. It has argued that, while an absolute optimum is unattainable, there are substantial room for improvements, if students are helped with seeing the relevance of their studies, and taught how to form meaningful relations between the modules, as well as being continually encouraged to rehearse and retrieve previously gained knowledge. The changes that would be required are not major, but minor, and would mostly involve coordination between the teachers where their different subjects overlap. Finally, the paper has indicated that there are substantial pedagogical research, which suggest that such a change would be beneficial for the students overall learning outcome. It would, if successful, move the students' learning up in the SOLO taxonomy. A taxonomy by which we measure the quality of learning in relation to the level of information processing.[10] Besides, it could prove to be great fun for the teachers, though I have no data to back this claim up.

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[8] Ibid. p. 211.
[9] Ibid. p.197.
[10] Svinicki, M. D. & McKeachie, W. J., (2014). McKeachie's Teachings Tips. Wadsworth: Belmont, CA. p. 10.

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