

An Invitation to Think through Writing: A Philosopher's Experience

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[Draft oral version]

"The life of science is in the desire to learn."
Charles S. Peirce, *CP* 1.235, c.1902

0. Introduction

In a world in which daily life is frequently detached from an intelligent examination of oneself and of the fruits of human activity, a philosophy that separates itself from genuine human problems is a luxury that we cannot afford. Philosophy is not —and cannot be— only an academic exercise, but is an instrument for the progressive critical and rational reconstruction of everyday living. In this sense, teaching core curriculum philosophy subjects during almost two decades has been for me not only a challenge, but also a blessing.

In my presentation of today I want to share some of my experience that might be useful to a young philosopher starting to teach core curriculum courses, and at the same time I want to try to summarize how teaching these introductory courses has somehow changed my way of practicing philosophy. In order to do that I will divide my exposition into three sections: 1) A brief presentation of my courses; 2) Some comment about the impact on the students; and 3) The impact on me.

1. A brief presentation of my courses

In our lives as philosophers and teachers of core curriculum courses, we have to integrate into a single field of activity the two Kantian concepts of philosophy, *Schulbegriff* [academic philosophy] and *Weltbegriff* [world and vital philosophy]. Like a magnetic field with two poles, we have to pay attention in our daily work: on the one hand, to scholarship, the publication of highly cited papers in the most respected professional journals; and on the other hand, we have to listen to the cries of humanity —usually voiced by our students— and try to help them with intelligent solutions, taking a personal part in some of the most pressing issues of contemporary debates. As everybody knows, there is a tension between these two poles, but this tension is also the cause of the spark that yields light and heat. In a similar way, there will be tension in our life between rigorous scholarship and teaching core curriculum introductory courses, but this tension is —at least in my experience— extremely healthy.

According to me, the most fruitful way of arranging a core curriculum course is conceiving it as "an invitation to think about contemporary key issues through personal writing". Writing about *personally relevant* issues is the best way to start thinking. In fact,

¹ I want to express my deep gratitude to Prof. José María Torralba for his kind invitation to take part in this Conference. I am also grateful to Alexia Tefel for polishing my English.

when doing that, we may find in most of our students a middle ground or a peculiar synthesis of both poles: *Schulbegriff* and *Weltbegriff*. Most of them are eager to learn, and their learning is only possible if we teachers are living philosophers. That is, *if philosophy truly lives in our lives*.

The standard core curriculum subject that I teach now has the title «Thought and Life: The Art of Personal Writing». This year it is offered as an optional course for students of Education, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy and Science. Only 50 students are accepted in each group since the sessions are expected to be very participative. The course has a total of 13 sessions of one hour and a half each week from September to November or from January to April. The course has some introductory lectures about how to write, how to think, how to develop personal creativity, and so on. But the real lever of the course is the five essays of no more than 600 words that each student has to deliver about the following issues:

- 1) "A biographical profile".
- 2) "Young people".
- 3) "To forget or to forgive".
- 4) "Sex and love" or "The Family is decisive".
- 5) "The political debate" or "Peace in the world".

The essays are scheduled to be turned in every two weeks. As an inspiration for the personal writings, the students have to read for the topics 2-5 some relevant sections of my book *Una invitación a pensar* or other texts uploaded in the web of the course. The first four essays are done individually, and the essay number 5 is prepared in groups of three or four students. Half of the sessions are invested in reading out loud and publicly discussing six to eight of the essays chosen in advance by the professor. This is very likely the most interesting element of the subject, in particular for the students of science, since dialogue is not expected in the other subjects that they take.

After being corrected by the professor or teaching assistant, all the texts should be uploaded to a personal blog that each student has to prepare. Also at the end of the semester each student has to prepare a video of no more than 5 minutes introducing his or her blog and the experience they had with this course². All the blogs are listed in the webpage of the course and are publicly available to the rest of the students.

2. The impact on the students

The impact of a course of the type just described is important for most of the students. It is an elective course; on the first day the importance of writing is highlighted and it is

² Some brilliant samples are Laura Larrayoz: "¿Quién soy? Mi pequeña locura" [<https://mi-pequena-locura.blogspot.com/>], Leyre Laborda: "Carta a mi yo pasado: Tengo miedo" [<https://llaborda.wixsite.com/miespaciodesoledad>], or Lucía Villanueva: "Loud and clear" [<http://lvillanuevaarnedo1.blogspot.com/>].

suggested that they should change to another optional course if they are not eager to learn to write and to dialogue about "vitally important topics". With the aim of getting feedback from the students in order to improve the course in the future, a voluntary and anonymous questionnaire is carried out at the end of each year with very positive results and with really useful suggestions to improve the organization of the course for future years.

The subject is considered by the students as a *different* subject, because it has allowed them to explore and improve competencies that sometimes remain in the background, such as deep reflection on their own lives, their oral and written expression, and to contrast their thoughts with those of other people. The tools used to achieve these objectives —theoretical expositions, essays, colloquiums, the video and the blog— have been valued by almost all students as adequate and enriching.

But it is not easy to describe the *real* impact that starting to think through writing has in the life of the students.³ Some of them take vital relevant decisions (changing degrees, ending a toxic personal relation, etc.), and most of them discover the power of writing as an efficient tool for personal improvement.⁴ From time to time some students ask to read their essays privately with the professor so they can share a personal situation (bullying, rape or sexual abuse, mental or physical illness, suicidal tendencies, suffering for the divorce of their parents, etc.) and ask for some piece of advice. In some of these cases, the students should be referred to professional help on campus or in town.

More specifically, I would like to highlight —taking the expression from Fischer and Nobis— that "writing is an ethical activity, and becoming a better writer can make you a better person".⁵ Students realize that this is true, that when they put all their attention in writing and thinking, they are able to overcome the deadly superficiality of our time, and they start to listen to others, to respect different opinions and learn from them. After those sessions of reading and discussion of the essays the students left the classroom convinced that they had learned something much more valuable than the passive taking of notes from a superb lecture from the professor. That is marvelous!

3. The impact on me

Teaching core curriculum philosophy courses has had an important impact on me. In first place, I am convinced that philosophy should start from real conversations and not from abstract ideas alien to the life and thought of the students and the teacher. Let me quote from my admired Charles S. Peirce (*CP* 8.112, c.1900):

Remembering, then, that philosophy is a science based upon everyday experience, we must not fall into the absurdity of setting down as a datum and starting-point of philosophy any abstract and simple idea, as Hegel did when he began his logic with pure Being; [...] We must not begin by talking of pure ideas, —vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation, — but must begin with men and their conversation.

³ It might be illustrative to read Ana Pestano's "¿Para qué?" in her blog *Párate para ti*, 9 abril 2019; available at <<http://parateparati.blogspot.com/2019/04/para-que.html>>.

⁴ J. Nubiola, "El asesoramiento personal como taller de escritura", *Estudios sobre Educación* 2 (2002), 85-96. Available at <<http://www.unav.es/users/Articulo34b.pdf>>.

⁵ B. Fischer and N. Nobis, "Why Writing Better Will Make You a Better Person", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 June 2019. Available at <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Writing-Better-Will-Make/246406>>.

In a well-known Socratic tradition, I believe that philosophy should start with our conversations and the different real opinions about human problems. In this sense, the core curriculum courses that I have taught for years have provided to me with a real starting point for doing philosophy. I have learnt from my students, from their questions, their problems and their real doubts. I am particularly rewarded when the discussion that arose in the classroom continues amongst the students in the corridors and the cafeteria after the class is ended.⁶

Secondly, I want to insist that only the teacher who *lives* his or her science is able to share with the students his or her way of life. There is no mystery in this: it is the same in any other subject. But in philosophy, if teaching does not affect the life of the professor, it will not affect the life of the students either: philosophy will be dismissed as something boring and irrelevant. It might even be said that the main thing a philosopher teaches is his or her own life, his personal attitude in philosophy: his personal search for the truth is the message. I remember how I was struck when I read Pierre Hadot's book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* twenty years ago:

The essential characteristic of the phenomenon "philosophy" in antiquity was that at that time a philosopher was, above all, someone who lived in a philosophical way. In other words, the philosopher was someone whose life was guided by his or her reason, and who was a practitioner of the moral virtues.⁷

This is what I have got from core curriculum courses: the need of living as a philosopher in order to be able to get the attention of my audience. According to Hadot the professionalization of philosophy in the universities from the thirteenth century onwards implied the loss of its vitality, its inevitable transformation into something "scholastic" in the worst sense of the term, something you may find today in most departments of analytic philosophy in the English-speaking world. We have to bring back to our classes the problems that affect the real life of students and professors. Hadot's words echo those of Thoreau from 1854, that Hadot also quotes elsewhere.⁸

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. (...) The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life.⁹

This is what I have tried to do with my teaching and I've enjoyed a lot with it. Recent voices identify the contemporary soulless competition for grades and status and the general market-orientation of the universities as the ruin of the humanities.¹⁰ It seems to me that core curriculum philosophy courses are the real place to reverse this general trend.

⁶ Cf. J. N. Torgerson, "Why I Teach Philosophy", *Teaching Philosophy*, 13 (1990), 11.

⁷ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, 281.

⁸ P. Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers", *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19 (2005) 229;

⁹ H. D. Thoreau, *Walden*, [1854] Annotated edition, section 1-A, par. 19. Available at <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden1a.html>.

¹⁰ L. Siegel, "Who Ruined the Humanities", *The Wall Street Journal*, Review, 13-14 July 2013, C1-C2; M. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 143; L. Waters, *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2005.