SOPHISTRY AND PHILOSOPHY: TWO APPROACHES TO TEACHING LEARNING

Abstract. As university teachers, are we heirs to the Sophists or to Socrates the philosopher? Do we teach students institutional know-how like academic ethics and strategies like writing and study skills, which offer shortcuts to institutional competence, or do we draw forth knowledge from students, eliciting wisdom from them and developing what the Greeks called ethos (character) and fidelity to a way of thinking? In short, do we teach a skill or a good? The first approach is sophistical (after the Greek teachers of rhetoric, the Sophists), and seeks to produce efficient knowledge-workers. The second approach is Socratic, or philosophical (after the Greek teacher of philosophy, Socrates), and seeks to produce good citizens. As these ancient names and terms suggest, this is a problem with a long history, but it is one with a local and contemporary resonance, in terms of the state of tertiary education both in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where I live and teach, and at this historical juncture. My question here is how we university teachers might negotiate this binary: how we might bridge these two positions and thereby perhaps transcend them.

SOFÍSTICA Y FILOSOFÍA. DOS PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE ENSEÑAR A APRENDER

Resumen: Como profesores universitarios, ¿somos herederos de los principios Sofistas o de las ideas de Sócrates, el filósofo? ¿Enseñamos a los estudiantes habilidades como la ética académica y estrategias como la escritura y destrezas de estudio, que ofrecen acceso directo hacia la competencia institucional, o extraemos conocimiento de nuestros estudiantes, provocando sabiduría en ellos y desarrollando lo que los griegos denominaron ethos (carácter) y fidelidad hacia una forma de pensamiento? En resumen, ¿enseñamos una destreza o un bien? El primer acercamiento es sofístico (derivado de los maestros griegos de la retórica, los Sofistas), y persigue producir eficientes trabajadores del conocimiento. El segundo acercamiento es socrático, o filosófico (después del maestro griego de filosofía, Sócrates), y busca producir buenos ciudadanos. Como estos antiguos nombres y términos sugieren, estamos ante un problema con una larga tradición, pero también es un problema con resonancia local contemporánea en cuanto al estado de la educación terciaria, tanto en Aotearoa/Nueva Zelanda, donde vivo y enseño, como en nuestra coyuntura histórica. Mi pregunta, aquí, hace referencia a cómo nosotros, profesores universitarios, podríamos negociar esta dicotomía binaria: cómo podríamos enlazar estas dos posiciones y, por lo tanto, quizá trascenderlas.

Palabras clave: Sofistas, Sócrates, mayéutica, aprendizaje transformacional, evaluación, crecimiento mental.

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1. THE TWO APPROACHES: THE SOPHISTICAL AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL

Broadly speaking, then, there are two approaches to teaching learning at work in the university: the sophistical and the philosophical, as schematized in Table 1. The approaches differ in their understandings of the aim of learning and its outcome, the role of the teacher, the ideal for learners, and the idea of learning.

approach	sophistical	philosophical
aim of learning	training	education
outcome of learning	institutional know-how i.e. competence (sōphisma) and knowledge (epistemē)	knowledge i.e. wisdom (sophiā) and character (ēthos)
role of the teacher	teacher as insider	teacher as mentor
ideal for learners	efficient knowledge-workers	good citizens
idea of learning	a rhetoric, according to which truth is contextual learning the conventions, i.e. decoding and encoding	a vocation, understood as truth to oneself or to universal Truth (re)invention, i.e. 'own-coding'

Table 1. The sophistical and philosophical approaches to teaching learning.

First, I will sketch out how I see the two approaches, where I stand relative to them, and how things stand with the university in Aotearoa/New Zealand at this historical junc-

ture. Then, I will speak to how the two approaches play out in practice and how we might transcend this binary.

1.1. Approach 1: Sophistry

According to Plato's Sophist (231c–e; see Heidegger, 1997, pp. 206–211), the Sophists were teachers-for-hire, pragmatic teachers of rhetoric. Their practice of questioning the existence of and appeals to traditional deities, of investigating cosmology and "physics," and of teaching rhetorical argumentation – and taking fees for it – prompted a popular reaction against them; from this animus is derived our modern understanding of sophistry as the use of rhetorical sleight-of-hand to deceive or to flatter (compare Kerferd, 1954). However, their interest in the politics of discourse embodied and, no doubt, fostered the growth of democracy in Greece – and appears strangely modern. For this reason, Friedrich Nietzsche (1997) calls the Sophists the "teachers" of Greek culture, "the culture of the most impartial knowledge of the world" (p. 103, section 168).

The goal of what I have called the sophistical approach to teaching learning in the university is less lofty. It aims to pass on institutional know-how to students, namely, to train them in academic ethics and strategies like study skills (called competencies elsewhere) that offer shortcuts to institutional competence (Gk. sōphisma) and knowledge (Gk. epistemē). It seeks to produce efficient knowledge-workers, who can apply such skills in whatever context they find themselves. It is a "keys to the kingdom" approach to teaching learning, in which the teacher is the insider with the key to the kingdom of higher learning; the student, the outsider who wants access to it. The sophistical approach informs much of the strategic discourse of the university, from its institutional strategic plans to its advocacy of a strategic approach to learning (Entwistle, 1987). It focusses on the products (outcomes) of learning and on education as "transactional" (Miller & Seller, 1985, p. 7). At its best, it approximates to the collegial discourse of the university as we thought it once was – and may still be, if Burton Clark's (2001) vision of "collegial entrepreneurship" in the university were to come to pass (p. 15).

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Figure 1. Perugino, P. (c. 1481–1482). Delivery of the Keys, or, Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter. From Sistine Chapel, Rome

1.2. Approach 2: Philosophy

Socrates was the prototype of philosophical teachers, a teacher of wisdom (see Nussbaum, 2010). Unlike the Sophists, Socrates accepted no fee for his teaching and adopted a self-effacing posture as a teacher, as exemplified in his principal contributions to philosophical dialectic: the elenctic method (Gk. "cross-examination") and maieutics (Gk. "midwifery"). Elenchus, also known as Socratic method or irony, aims by questioning to help the 'student' understand that what they think is true is false (Theaetetus, 150c). This is Socrates as gadfly (Apology, 30e). Maieutics aims to help the 'student' give birth, by problem-solving, to a truth latent in them (Theaetetus, 150d). This is Socrates as midwife (Theaetetus, 150b). The former is a privative method, ending in aporia (Gk. "impasse"); the latter, a positive method, ending in anamnesis (Gk. "remembrance," or literally, "un-forgetting"). Thus, while elenchus works on those who think they know something but really don't, maieutics works on those who know something but don't know that they do. Both methods assume that the focus of teaching is on the student's learning, not the teacher (not for nothing was Socrates' motto the paradox "I know that I know nothing"; see Apology, 21d).

Similarly, what I have called the philosophical approach to teaching learning in the university aims to draw forth knowledge from students, that is, to elicit wisdom (Gk. sophiā) and develop character (Gk. ēthos), or fidelity to a way of thinking. It seeks to

produce good citizens who act according to character at all times. It is a mentor/apprentice model of teaching learning, in which the teacher as mentor aims to draw forth from student apprentices what they already know but don't know that they do. The philosophical approach informs the critical discourse of the university, from its role as "critic and conscience of society" enshrined in statute in Aotearoa/New Zealand (New Zealand Government, 2010; part 14, section 162) to the "critical consciousness" that is often taken to drive reflective practice (Friere, 2005). It focusses on the process, not the products, of learning and on education as "transformational," not transactional (Miller & Seller, 1985, p. 8). Were the university to be transformed, such a philosophical approach to teaching learning might form the basis of a "critical-creative" university in the service of what Stephen Turner and I have called "the university's critical-creative capacity to posit other or better futures, to generate a critical surplus, in the service of a public or political good, in other words, to educate (from the Latin educare; literally, 'to lead forth')" (Sturm & Turner, 2011, p. 170; see Peters & Besley, 2013).
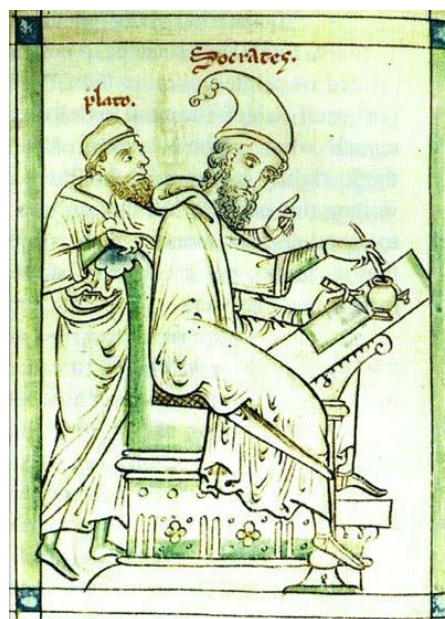

Figure 2. Socrates and Plato. (1230-1259?). From M. Paris, *Prognostica Socratis Basilei*. Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS. Ashmole. 304, fol. 31v°.

To put it more simply, the problem with which I began – do we teach a skill or a good? – can be restated in this way: are we insiders offering the keys to the institution or mentors nurturing our apprentices?

2. THE UNIVERSITY AND ME

Where do I stand on this binary? I thought, when I began thinking about this problem, that I did neither thing, that I was somewhere in between. As a writing teacher, I teach 'better' students, who know the basics, to develop an individual voice, to be 'good' writers; I teach 'less able' students the basics, the skills, to get the job done. Another thought struck me: because I split my time between being a learning advisor and a writing teacher, I found myself between learning support, which for me was primarily about writing skills, about enabling students to learn the conventions of academic writing, and writing studies, which perhaps should be about invention, but ends up being more about learning skills, about managing the writing process. But to simply say that I fell between camps was unsatisfactory, I concluded: I needed a better theory, one that worked for both approaches, because I take a lot from both of them, and both have their virtues and vices. I wanted to focus on the things that had worked for me in my teaching.

But this is not all about me: that this problem might become an issue is in part due to the state of the university here and at this historical juncture. A university like the University of Auckland, which "fast-follows" so-called 'best practice' elsewhere, serves two masters (Skilling & Boven, 2007, pp. 40–41). As an ex-national university (a "U 1.0"), it serves the nation-state: it aims to raise national cultural capital in the service of a certain national narrative. As such, it works on the 'Oxbridge' model of scholarship and mentorship, which is a philosophical approach. As proto- (or would-be) transnational university (a "U 2.0"), it serves the global market: it aims to attract international financial capital by applying generic knowledge management processes to research and teaching (Sturm & Turner, 2011). As such, it also works on a Higher Education model of research-led teaching and learning, which is a more of a sophistical approach. The university is itself split along the lines of my two approaches to teaching learning. In part, I am alert to the problem because I teach writing, which is increasingly the mode of discourse in the university for students and staff. (The knowledge management processes of the university that are applied to research and teaching are, as we academics are all very much aware, written: statements of aims, objectives and outcomes, performance reviews and reports, strategic plans, and so on.)

3. SOPHISTICAL TEACHING

The sophistical approach to teaching learning in the university aims to pass on institutional know-how to students, thereby to produce efficient knowledge-workers. I'd argue that, despite those who bemoan the decline of the "wisdom tradition" of the university – the 'university in ruins' tradition, named for Bill Readings' 1996 polemic – such an approach isn't all bad. It puts students' learning needs first and might well produce graduates who better meet the needs of the workforce. It might even be said to be the

way of the future: it better supports a process of meeting a set of measurable aims, objectives and outcomes, or strategic goals; it seems entirely in keeping with the workings of the transnational U 2.0.

Most importantly, the sophistical approach enables students to learn strategically, to understand the space of the university. It thus sees learning as a rhetoric, according to which truth is contextual. Students continually ask after the rules of whatever academic practice we are teaching. This is because they are learning the conventions of the university: its templates, or 'scripts' perhaps, which for students seem to reduce to a single master 'Script,' namely, give the university what it seems to want. They are learning to decode, to 'de-scribe,' such scripts in order to encode, to 're-inscribe,' them (we could just as easily say 'decrypt' and 're-encrypt'). For example, to learn the conventions of the academic essay is to be able to put an essay together in a way that makes it 'true' in the university context, often according to a "point-first" template (Sturm, 2012) for which the standard formula is "tell me what you're going to tell me, tell it, then tell me what you told me" (Hahn, 2003, p. 141).

Though it seems that we are simply developing a sense of a "community of practice" in such teaching, offering students the "keys to the kingdom" (Lave & Wenger, 1992, p. 27), we are also exploring a "community of affect" (Hebdige, 1988, p. 90). Affect manifests itself in the writing 'zone' in various ways. First, it emerges in students' anxiety about learning in the face of the secret codes of the university and at the failure of their self-taught codes – what I call "fumblerules" (after Safire, 1979) – to adequately encode their own writing. Second, it appears in their assumptions about learning to learn in the university, in particular, in the assumption that learning is passive and imitative, which leads them to mimic these secret codes in an attempt to placate the university. This affect generates what Alice Horning (1987) calls a "climate of fear" in the writing zone (p. 65).

What does this mean for us teachers? That we cannot simply teach to the Script: this would be 'con-scription.' Instead, we must decode and recode with students. We take the lead in this coding process because we work within, and know how to 'work,' the system to which the student wants access and with which they cannot but work. We help them see the Script as a script, just one of the possible scripts we could adopt as teachers and students, albeit the one that is authorised by the university in its rhetoric. This coding process I call, after Jeffrey Williams (2008), "teaching the university."

4. PHILOSOPHICAL TEACHING

However, it could be said that something is lost if we think of teaching learning in the university as simply passing on institutional know-how to students. The philosophical approach to teaching learning in the university instead aims to draw forth knowledge

from students in order to produce good citizens. What is the knowledge that it aims to draw forth from students? It is wisdom, in keeping with the wisdom tradition of the university, albeit a wisdom that is subjective, or existential, rather than objective, or 'eternal.' It is the invention of a self from the fusing of the student's experience and expertise outside the university with what they learn – or how they "learn to be" – in the university (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 19). So, over and above seeing the Script as a script ('de-scription'), it is to rewrite/own the Script as their own script (or 'in-scription'). That is to say, through their "codework" (Wark, 2007), they open up the possibilities of what Boris Groys has called "self-design" (2008), of creating "own codes," to adapt Vilém Flusser (2002, pp. 169–170).

How do we teachers teach in such a way that students can create their own codes? We have to create a learning space in which this is possible; in the case of the writing zone, it is to create a space that allows for creative, or rather, "deformative," reading and writing that engages students in active processes of knowledge making (after McGann & Samuels, 1999, p. 109–110; see Eagleton, 1986, p. 16). To this end, students should, as much as possible, co-create course content and assessments, and be self- or peer- and ipsatively assessed (assessed against their own performance; see Hughes, 2011). The simplest way to allow students to own-code is to allow them to design and/or assess their own assignments. There is, of course, no contradiction in co-creation paired with self- or ipsative assessment: often we need to work with someone else to find out what we know and think. This is just to say that a script is often a co-write in the writing zone – and elsewhere. What is most important is that, in the process of 'own-coding,' students are creating a space for themselves in the university; they are "inventing the university" (Bartholomae, 1986).

5. BEYOND THE BINARY: PHILOSOPHISTICAL TEACHING

So if seeing the Script as a script (de-scription) is in some sense preparatory to rewriting, or 'owning,' the Script to create one's own script (in-scription), there is a link that bridges the sophistical and philosophical approaches to teaching learning. But how might we teachers reinforce this link? We might draw on Carol Dweck's (2006) distinction between a "fixed" and a "growth mindset" (or "self-theory") in students. Students of the former group believe their success is based on innate ability: they believe that they are 'naturals.' Those of the latter group believe their success is based on hard work and learning: they believe that it can be nurtured. To extrapolate, Dweck offers us a way to have the best of both worlds, the sophistical and the philosophical. As Trei (2007) writes, "[her] research show[s] how changing a key belief – a student's self-theory about intelligence and motivation – with a relatively simple intervention can make a big difference." By making a sophistical intervention in a student's learning process, for example, passing on a study or writing skill to them, we might change a key element of

their "self-theory" and thereby enable them to grow philosophically, that is, enable them to learn in a way that is true to themselves.

Such an intervention, then, offers a genuine teachable moment. How so? We teach – and both teachers and students can teach – by intervening in the scripting or co-scripting of the class, that is, we respond to other learners' "affect sequences" (responses) by intervening at the level of technique or offering alternative scripts (Gibbs, 2002, p. 339). Most of the alternative scripts I offer allow students to own their learning: 'use the university to your own ends,' 'understand that neither the university nor the learner is fixed,' 'you can teach yourself' are three such scripts. Such "local interventions" I call teaching 'off Script' (Gibbs, 2002, p. 340). They can bring about new codes that are truer to both the learner and the learning space and thereby transcend the binary of the sophistical and the philosophical. Such modes embody what might be called, to recuperate an obsolete word, a "philosophistical" approach to learning (see Cassin, 2000, p. 116).

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