

My foremost objectives as an instructor are to (1) foster students' confidence in their capacity to succeed in philosophy while (2) helping to improve their abilities in a variety of transferable skills, including their abilities to read, write, speak, and think clearly, critically, and deeply about philosophical ideas and (3) enabling them to see the applicability of philosophy to their everyday lives. To do so, I use a goal-based approach to course design and delivery that emphasises the importance of motivation for successful learning, derived from contemporary empirical research on effective pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

Each class I have taught has had students with diverse academic backgrounds and learning preferences. Some will have completed an in-depth study in philosophy, while others are receiving their first introduction to the subject. My teaching at Dalhousie University also includes courses outside my department, catering primarily to students in the Faculty of Computer Science. This diversity highlights a key challenge: ensuring that my instruction is well-tailored to meet individual levels of personal understanding, motivation, and learning. In addition to differences in the students' educational and cultural backgrounds, motivation may differ depending on, e.g., class size, type, and level. For example, those registered in a graduate seminar with five students are probably more *self*-motivated than those in an introductory, survey-style lecture with 250 students.

I strive to meet these challenges by focusing on core principles that consider the effects of *environment*, *expectancy*, and *value* on individual motivation. These general principles apply widely, but their implementation can vary from course to course. This flexibility allows me to tailor the course delivery and requirements to meet the particular needs and interests of the students registered.

**Environment.** An open, safe, supportive learning environment is essential in any classroom, but this is especially true in philosophy since the course content may challenge the long-held beliefs of individual students, and discussions may involve sensitive or controversial topics. So, maintaining an inclusive and supportive classroom environment is paramount. One of the ways I accomplish this for small, discussion-based seminars is to use the first meeting to collaboratively decide upon a set of expectations (ground rules) for how we will conduct ourselves in discussions throughout the semester. This exercise affords the students agency in contributing to the tone of the class. It also allows trust-building by setting guidelines for respecting diverse points of view and allows me to better understand the needs of the particular group. Once the ground rules are collectively agreed upon, they are added to the foundational ground rules that I provide in every syllabus, ensuring that they are common knowledge so the students can hold themselves, classmates, and myself accountable to our collective standards.

Large, lecture-based environments have different challenges. Here, I focus on maximising accessibility and minimising anxiety. For example, I ensure that all the required readings are easily accessible to all the students. I also utilise course notes or lecture slides and make these available in advance, so students do not need to split their attention between listening and note-taking. When courses are delivered online, I record the lecture and upload it to the course webpage so that students have an opportunity to revisit things they may have missed in their own time and at their own pace. To empower my students and accommodate neurodiversity, I set clear expectations for assignments by providing detailed instructions, concrete sample assignments, and thorough grading rubrics. Since students (especially those receiving their first introduction to philosophy) may not understand how a philosophy paper differs from other papers they have written, a concrete example helps students see my expectations for these assignments and how they can approach them.

Of course, the classroom environment is not static. To ensure continued engagement and efficacy, I solicit feedback from my students using a short anonymous questionnaire part way through the semester. ('What is going well?', 'What could be improved?', 'I would like more of... / less of...', etc.) Before doing so, I ensure that we have engaged in various class activities (large-group discussion, small group work, etc.) so the students may comment on which activities they have found most conducive to their learning. This informal feedback allows me to structure the rest of the course to their needs by weighting each student's feedback and shifting the frequency of course materials and my teaching strategies to align with the actual needs of the students registered in that class. By tailoring my classes

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., S. A. Ambrose, M. W. Bridges, M. DiPietro, M. C. Lovett, and M. K. Norman. 2010. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*; A. Kruglanski, M. Chernikova, and C. Kopetz. 2015. 'Motivation science'; K. Murayama, and A. J. Elliot. 2009. 'The joint influence of personal achievement goals and classroom goal structures on achievement-relevant outcomes'; among others.

to the students' diverse backgrounds and learning preferences, the initial challenges that diversity presents are turned into an advantage and an opportunity for engagement.

**Expectancy.** When designing a course, I consider how expectancy might be increased for diverse groups of students. I typically utilise the 'backward design model',<sup>2</sup> which begins by determining the course's learning outcomes, expectations, and goals—written in specific and measurable language;<sup>3</sup> designing assignments with those goals in mind; and providing course content that would allow those assignments to be completed. For example, common objectives for a philosophy course may include (1) the ability to read and understand difficult philosophical texts, (2) critical thinking and problem-solving skills, (3) the ability to present philosophical views and arguments clearly and logically, and (4) the ability to share ideas clearly in writing and conversation. By aligning and communicating the course objectives, assessments, and instructional strategies, students know my expectations, and they are given opportunities to practise content, showcase their level of understanding, and receive and respond to feedback. For graduate courses, I additionally emphasise goals that reflect certain practical skills required in professional philosophy, and I design course assignments based on these goals. For example, providing charitable and constructive 'referee reports' in response to assigned reading; presenting a 10-min 'commentary' on a paper, as one might do at a professional conference; writing a high-quality abstract for one's research paper; or, writing a short (3000-word) research paper, as is required for submission to professional association meetings.

Since past experiences influence expectations for future performance, I make sure to provide students with early opportunities for success in the form of short, low-stakes assignments. This approach helps reinforce students' beliefs that they can do philosophy in the first place. Having assessments early and frequently also disperses the weight of grading, which helps to reduce anxiety and further allows me to calibrate the level of difficulty of the course, so students are appropriately challenged. Being appropriately challenged is important because if an assignment is too difficult, it will negatively affect expectancy; if it is too easy, it will negatively impact the value students place on it.

**Value.** Motivation for a task requires seeing some value in it, and the values students place on their goals in a course can be mutually reinforcing. Although I cannot control whether students value philosophy in itself, I can affect the instrumental value students put in philosophy so they may be motivated to partake actively in philosophical discourse in the first place. Being shown that they can succeed (increased expectancy) may positively affect attainment value and (hopefully) intrinsic value. To affect the instrumental value that students place on philosophy, I try to illustrate how philosophical methods are widely applicable and that philosophical content can be relevant to everyday life. I emphasise the instrumental value of philosophical skills—such as critical reasoning, facility with arguments, and proficiency with communication—by showing their relevance to almost any academic, professional, or personal pursuit. I highlight the relevance of philosophical content by incorporating real-world examples into lectures and assignments—for example, trolley problems can be couched in terms of autonomous vehicles to highlight how the ethical considerations of certain moral dilemmas are now pressing matters of immediate concern.

**In sum,** my approach to teaching is grounded in empirical research, which suggests that learning and performance are supported by goal-directed behaviour. This method, in turn, is guided by motivation, which itself is affected by value, expectancy, and environment. I can relate philosophy to my students' lives—both in terms of content and as a skill—to affect the value they place on succeeding in philosophy; I can help students see that they are capable of mastering philosophical concepts to increase expectancy; and I can foster an environment that is accessible and supportive.

Rather than a static approach, I continually consider student feedback when adapting courses for future delivery. I look forward further advancing my skills as a teacher and developing additional strategies to be increasingly responsive to and supportive of my future students.

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<sup>2</sup> G. Wiggins and J. McTighe. 2005. *Understanding by Design*.

<sup>3</sup> L. Anderson and D. R. Krathwohl. 2001. *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing*.