

The Pedagogy of Controversial Questions ^[1]

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The purpose of this study is to find out if students who are not philosophy majors are able in one semester to learn some basic philosophical methods of critical thinking.

I plan to use “Politics and the Law” (Phil 3200) which I teach regularly as the site for the research project. There are between 30-40 students in each class. Most, if not all, of the students are fulfilling a college requirement when taking this course; they have no particular interest in or knowledge of anything having to do with philosophy.

The design of this study will give students on the first day a set of questions to answer. These same questions will be given on the last day of class. The idea is to see how many of them, if any, add a critical note into the way they answer questions. Through a process of one-page critical papers and three three-page presentations on controversial legal questions students will be taught how to incorporate a critical stance—pro and con answers, for example—into any discussion.

Another component to be evaluated along this process is the ability to distinguish between “trivial” and “controversial” questions. The former are considered trivial insofar as they can be answered empirically (and not because they are unimportant), while the latter are in principle open to alternative (and opposing) answers.

I have noticed over the years that students are astounded at their own ability to formulate sophisticated arguments in the course of one semester, a skill they don’t necessarily learn in their respective disciplines.

Groups audience:

President's Teaching Scholars Program

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