*Cultivating Intellectual Humility in Political Philosophy Seminars*

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**Abstract:** The cultivation of intellectual character is an important goal within university education. This article focusses on cultivating intellectual humility. It first explores an account of intellectual humility from recent literature on the intellectual virtues. Then, it considers one recent pedagogical approach – Making Thinking Visible – as a means of teaching intellectual virtue. It assesses one particular technique for cultivating intellectual humility arising from this pedagogical literature, and applies it to the teaching of political philosophy. Finally, there is a discussion concerning how to supplement these techniques to best teach political philosophy generally, and for the purposes of cultivating intellectual humility in particular. It is argued that, by introducing the technique of the Circle of Viewpoints, supplemented by techniques from the Compassion in Education literature, the modules I teach can better cultivate intellectual humility in my students.

1. **Introduction**

The teaching of philosophy in higher education can be understood as having two aims, broadly construed. First, philosophy students are to be taught an *explicit* curriculum. This involves learning facts about the history and development of ideas and their application to issues in the wider world, the central theories that have been dominant in the distinct philosophical fields of inquiry, and the main philosophers who have espoused these theories and ideas. Second, philosophy students are to develop as individuals in line with an *implicit* curriculum (Atkinson 1981). The implicit curriculum involves developing virtuous character traits, professionalism and professional ethics, experience in presenting and writing to a high standard, concern for the wider world and various useful cognitive and practical skills like time-keeping.

The model of dividing up the aims of education in this way – where the explicit curriculum concerns knowledge and understanding whilst the implicit curriculum concerns, largely, the cultivation of character – can be applied to most, or perhaps all, disciplines within higher education. However, in many humanities disciplines, especially a field like philosophy, a focus on the implicit curriculum has become more pressing and relevant. This is because the knowledge taught as part of the explicit curriculum is not often relevant to problems in the working world beyond university. Whilst many disciplines in the sciences teach applied knowledge that is often required in one’s profession post-university, philosophy, and other disciplines, do not teach content that is so easily applied. For this reason at least, teachers of philosophy ought to ensure that their students also develop in accord with the implicit curriculum (Eisenstadt 2015; Rupp 2013).

The implicit curriculum is recognised, in part, at the University of Hertfordshire through its six graduate attributes: ‘Professionalism, employability and enterprise’, ‘Learning and research skills’, ‘Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability’, ‘Respect for others’, ‘Social responsibility’ and ‘Global awareness’. Some of these attributes are particularly relevant to teaching not just philosophy in general, but *political* philosophy in particular. For instance, in its interpretation of ‘respect for others’, the university maintains that it ‘promotes self-awareness, empathy, cultural awareness and mutual respect’. This issue is often met in political philosophy when students clash over their views concerning contentious issues like democracy and rights. Moreover, respect for others is a pressing issue given some widespread problems concerning virtuous and vicious discourse on social media and in public debates on political issues (Heersmink 2018; Tanesini 2018a).

One character trait that will enhance respect for others, as is important when engaging in virtuous, open-minded debate, is *intellectual humility*. Although there has been a number of conceptual accounts of this trait in some recent literature (e.g. Kidd 2015; Tanesini 2018b; Whitcomb et al. 2017) that regularly defend the importance of intellectual humility, there are only limited suggestions for how to enable students to acquire this trait (Baehr 2013; Battaly 2006). Moreover, these suggestions are rarely connected to particular pedagogical practices. To begin overcoming these issues, this paper will briefly review some recent accounts of intellectual humility, and then look at how it can be taught by considering some existing pedagogical methods. The paper then makes some suggestions for how to apply these methods to the teaching of intellectual humility in the political philosophy classroom.

1. **Methods**

Much of the conceptual work concerning intellectual humility has been undertaken by virtue ethicists whose papers are hosted on the database, philpapers.org. An initial literature search was conducted on philpapers using the terms ‘intellectual’ and ‘humility’. 498 entries were found from a range of recent and older publications. Many of these were not relevant to the topic so were filtered according to several parameters. First, any duplicate entries were removed, and entries that did not use either ‘intellectual’ or ‘humility’ in the title or abstract were set aside. Second, they were filtered by the academic quality of each publication, i.e. the journal published in, or, for book chapters, the editor or publisher. This produced a cluster of 10 high-quality articles on intellectual humility.

Next, the library database at the University of Hertfordshire was utilised to discover publications related to pedagogy and teaching practice. This produced a large range (*c*. 1000) of publications. To select the most appropriate publications, I consulted a useful website (intellectualvirtues.org), which contains some suggested publications for teaching the intellectual virtues. The outcome of the library search was cross-referenced with this site to show which pedagogy publications might be most relevant to the task at hand. These publications have been reviewed carefully to determine which pedagogic practice best relates to the teaching of intellectual humility as it has been conceived in the theoretical literature.

1. **Results**

In this section I begin by reviewing some of the recent conceptual accounts of the nature of intellectual humility, and offer a broad statement of what it involves. I then review some pedagogical practices that could be used to cultivate intellectual humility in educational contexts.

* 1. *The Nature of Intellectual Humility*

Although several detailed accounts of the nature of intellectual humility have been developed in recent academic literature, these accounts share a number of important similarities and overlap in several ways. On one account developed by Kidd (2015), intellectual humility is a virtue of character that enables one to manage one’s confidence with respect to certain cognitive capacities. The capacities he has in mind include what we know, abilities like memory and vision, and learnable skills, like being good at maths. He argues that humility enables one to manage one’s ‘reasonable confidence’ (Williams 2005) in these kinds of cognitive capacities, i.e. to not be overly confident where one has limited cognitive capacity in a certain respect, and not to be under-confident where one has a cognitive capacity.

Kidd’s ideas are extended in two recent theories (Whitcomb et al. 2017; Tanesini 2018b), which defend the view that intellectual humility is a matter of being properly attentive to one’s intellectual limitations, and to work these limitations into one’s practical reasoning. Again, the limitations are taken to include such things as gaps in knowledge, unreliable cognitive processes like poor memory or eyesight, and intellectual character flaws, such as the disposition to draw hasty inferences. To be properly attentive to these intellectual limitations is a matter of giving rational appraisal to oneself and one’s epistemic position, and being disposed to act in a way that takes one’s limitations seriously. For instance, if someone knows that he lacks knowledge on a certain topic then he will be disposed to defer to the testimony of others who know more than he does on that very topic. If he is to be intellectually humble, then, he cannot insist that he is more knowledgeable than others when he knows that he is not: the humble person acknowledges her limitations and works them into her practical reasoning accordingly.

That is not to say, however, that the humble person is disposed to trust whatever she is told simply because it has been said by someone more knowledgeable. All it requires is for one to acknowledge one’s limitations and act on the basis that one has them. But that is consistent with recognising limitations in others, and hence reasons to resist deferring to what they say. For example, suppose I rightly acknowledge that, whilst I have some understanding of physics, this has mostly come from my school education and watching some Brian Cox documentaries on BBC, and so I’m hardly an expert. Now imagine that I am told by Stephen Hawking that it is likely that there are multiple universes. He is more knowledgeable than me and has more expertise as a physicist. However, humility does not demand that I immediately take on the belief that it is likely that there are multiple universes. This is because I can recognise reasons against deferring to Professor Hawking. Namely, that he has his own limitations, and his belief about multiverses is somewhat dubitable given our limited abilities of space exploration and investigation. I might, for a time at least, doubt rather than believe that there are multiple universes, without failing to be humble.

So, when it comes to deferring to someone’s testimony, we have reasons for trusting them and reasons against (Lackey 1999). Humility gives me a reason to trust others. Namely, if they lack an intellectual limitation that I have as this limitation concerns what they are telling me. However, this reason can be outweighed by others, and so humility doesn’t require someone to simply defer to others when they lack our limitations. We must balance the reasons for and against in each case.

Both of the accounts of humility considered so far involve making a proper appraisal of one’s own intellectual abilities, and the disposition to work these in to one’s practical situations. These accounts conceive of humility as an inwardly directed attitude. A third account (Roberts 2015) adds that intellectual humility is also an outwardly directed attitude that resists inappropriate concern for personal glory, honour, importance, status, prestige, prominence, and favourable notice. Such a trait would be outwardly focussed in the sense that pursuing these vain goals would involve appraising others as dangers and obstacles to one’s own personal achievements. If humility involves resisting these inappropriate goals, then it also resists viewing others as a threat to one’s intellectual achievements. Hence, the intellectually humble person will be more disposed to listen to and be open to the views of others, to defer to others when one’s own knowledge is lacking, and to learn from others.

If we follow these accounts, then, intellectual humility involves having a proper appraisal of one’s intellectual abilities – to have a rational level of confidence in the cognitive capacities that one has – and to use this confidence when deliberating and making practical decisions about how to act. It also helps one to resist pursuing intellectual achievements purely for the purposes of achieving vain personal glory.

From an educational perspective, the university and other education contexts provide ideal scenarios for cultivating intellectual humility. For, one can acquire a proper appraisal of one’s intellectual abilities through openness to others in general, and to their views in particular. Openness to others and to their views will help one to reflect on one’s cognitive and epistemic abilities and limitations, and it will help one to reflect on the abilities and knowledge that other people have, and where there are opportunities to learn from them. The educational environment provides an excellent context for learning this openness to others, and hence for cultivating intellectual humility. In the next section I explore some classroom practices and techniques for achieving this kind of cultivation.

* 1. *Educating for Intellectual Humility*

In their work *Making Thinking Visible* (2011), Ritchhart, Church and Morrison aim to develop (1) pedagogical techniques to promote the kinds of thinking typically utilised by students, and (2) to do so for a particular context. There are two predominant aims to their work. First, to view education primarily in terms of activities of thinking, rather than in terms of cognitive objectives. For instance, in the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson 2000), the objectives set out for learners are to remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, and create. However, Ritchhart et al. point out that in order to achieve these objectives, a learner must be involved in certain activities of thinking, which come *prior to* achieving these objectives. They say that ‘looking carefully to notice and fully describe…is at the heart of both science and art. Analysis and speculation depend on careful noticing.’ (p. 6). That is, a learner cannot analyse and evaluate without being involved in careful looking, noticing and describing – all of which are particular kinds of thinking.

The second predominant aim is to focus on kinds of thinking that are discipline-specific. Taxonomies like Bloom’s are highly generalised and must be contextualised in order to be applied effectively. Ritchhart et al. encourage teachers to determine, first, what kinds of thinking are primarily involved in the learning the subject is being taught as this will determine what activities are most relevant to give to the students. In my view, the kinds of thinking that are most important to cultivate in philosophy students concern clarifying concepts, identifying premises in arguments, critiquing the premises in those arguments, forming examples to support learners’ own views, challenging pre-existing assumptions, wondering and asking questions of others, and uncovering complexities in ideas and in their own thoughts.

With this list of kinds of thinking in hand, we’re able to see which of Ritchhart et al’s pedagogical techniques are most relevant to philosophy in general, and to cultivating intellectual humility in philosophy teaching. One technique that they discuss is called the ‘Circle of Viewpoints’ (pp. 171-77). This technique aims to promote and to nurture the ability to see different situations from someone else’s perspective. Such an ability helps humans to empathise with each other in different situations. But it can also be extremely important for philosophy since the student can learn how to gain a broader and more complete understanding of the topic and the different arguments for and against a particular position. Moreover, by viewing a topic from different perspectives, we gain an openness to others that will help to cultivate intellectual humility.

In order to set up the Circle of Viewpoints task, Ritchhart et al. suggest using an image that introduces a number of different perspectives. A useful image to use in political philosophy might be something from the recent Brexit campaign, such as an image of the union jack and the EU flag juxtaposed, or the Leave Campaign bus which advertised the £350m that would be available for the NHS after Brexit. The learners in the room should be asked to identify initial questions that arise from the image itself. Once the learners have briefly discussed the image, they should be set a particular topic within which to identify a set of relevant different perspectives. A relevant topic given an image on Brexit for political philosophy could be, for instance, whether we should utilise referenda in political decision-making, or what the obligations on the state might be to communicate truthfully to voters.

Once the topic has been decided, having been prompted by a relevant image, the students should be asked to create a list of different perspectives that people might have on the topic. This can include identifying people with vested interests and the impact the topic will have on certain people. Importantly, this will also involve determining which arguments people might use to justify their particular perspective. For instance, a person favouring Brexit might draw on arguments concerning sovereignty over laws affecting the UK, whilst someone opposed to Brexit could draw on arguments relating to having solidarity with other EU countries (Sangiovanni forthcoming).

Once the various leading perspectives and their supporting arguments have been identified, each student, or group of students, should be assigned a perspective to defend. This might, and ideally will involve, defending a view that they might disagree with themselves. The reason for this is because it will help people to become more open-minded by considering the best way to justify positions that they disagree with. Whether or not this practice actually changes the views of the student in any way, it will at least give them an appraisal of their own views by considering the views of others. They determine the competence of the argument supporting their own position, and develop a realistic appraisal of their own knowledge and competence. By doing this, the learners will be involved in the process of cultivating intellectual humility.

Finally, the students, or groups of students, should defend their position in reasoned dialogue with the other students in other groups. This practice will help them to see the plausibility or implausibility of their own viewpoint, and the viewpoint of others. It will also help them to understand the consequences of important events and decisions on the lives and well-being of other people.

The aims of the Making Thinking Visible pedagogy are highly applicable to teaching philosophy, and the Circle of Viewpoints technique provides a useful method for teaching intellectual humility within political philosophy seminars. In the next section, I’ll discuss some possible ways of enhancing the technique for my own purposes, and for implementing the technique within my own classroom.

1. **Discussion**

At the University of Hertfordshire, philosophy modules typically span 12 weeks of the semester, where each week the students receive a one-hour lecture and a one-hour seminar. The ideal time to place an activity like the Circle of Viewpoints would be during the seminar time. In preparation for a typical seminar, the students are given a set reading that gives them an overview of the topic they are looking at that week. We then usually discuss questions concerning the reading in the seminar time. My practice usually involves dividing the seminar into small groups of approximately 3-5 students, asking them to discuss the questions themselves, and then reporting their views back to the whole group. Although this technique is generally reliable, there are numerous occasions where the students struggle to engage with the learning activity, or where some students disengage from the activity whilst letting more vocal students from their group do the thinking and talking for them. By being more structured with these seminars, I hope to be able to engage each of the students more effectively. This is one of the outcomes that Ritchhart et al. aimed to achieve with their learning techniques. They say that

…[i]n the often misunderstood notion of experiential or inquiry-based learning, students are sometimes provided with lots of activities. Again, if designed well some of these activities can lead to understanding, but too often the thinking that is required to turn activity into learning is left to chance (Ritchhart et al. 2011, p. 9)

By structuring the seminars in a more open way as I currently do, I feel that the possible learning *is* often left to chance. Although the students often do learn, they sometimes fail to learn, and by introducing a more structured and intentional activity like the circle of viewpoints into my seminars, I believe I can engage more students more effectively and leave less to chance.

I currently teach two political philosophy modules. As the example in the previous section showed, there is a clear way of introducing the Circle of Viewpoints activity into my teaching on particular areas of political philosophy. Whilst this is evident in the case of democracy, I believe that it will be similarly applicable to other topics that are usually taught in my module, including Liberty; Rights; Multiculturalism; Justice; Religious Tolerance; Feminism; Environmentalism and Animal Rights.

Although the Circle of Viewpoints technique as it currently stands will make for a more structured improvement on my existing seminars as Ritchhart et al. present it, there is a way of supplementing the technique with some existing work at the University of Hertfordshire. The work on compassion in education by Dr Theo Gilbert (2017; 2018) provides a useful means of developing on the techniques proposed by Ritchhart et al. Gilbert (2017) found that the use of eye gaze in group work cultivated compassion amongst the participants. It was found that looking into the eyes of another person is a key mediator in students noticing and addressing distress or disadvantage of others in group work. Speculatively, we might expect that eye gaze will also help people to be more open to the different viewpoints and perspectives of others. When not looking at others we can, whether subliminally or not, close ourselves off from them. Since openness to others is a key way of cultivating intellectual humility, then it ought to follow that by encouraging eye contact with others during my seminars, I can help to facilitate the acquisition of intellectual humility.

Another way of supplementing the existing approach that has been suggested is by exhibiting intellectual humility myself as the educator. By being intellectually humble I can model intellectual humility in the hope of inspiring it in the students. Too often in academia a lecturer feels the need to exhibit omniscience to the students, not wanting to show any kind of weakness in terms of gaps in knowledge. In place of this, Richard C. Richards proposes that the teacher exhibit intellectual humility by engaging in the subject as an enthusiastic learner:

The good teacher of intellectual humility will be so enthusiastic about knowing and understanding things that she seems to forget her authoritative role and to seek and enjoy these goods for their own sake and with the freshness of someone experiencing them for the first time. Thus she models self-forgetful love of the subject. (Richards 2015, p. 187)

In the activities I am considering, perhaps the best way to achieve this is by joining with the group and getting involved in the activity. Not only I, as the teacher, then show willingness to learn from others and to grapple with their perspectives, I will also encourage other students to do the same, and can help to model compassionate behaviour such as good eye contact.

One role that the teacher has is to draw out the conclusions from the learning of the students. Although this is partly to explore what has been learned in the class, the teacher can also encourage the students to explore the kinds of traits and attitudes they are developing whilst on the course. So, at the end of my classes in which learning intellectual humility has been a focus, I can discuss the kinds of activities the students have been engaging in, and explore their relevance for intellectual humility. This will help the students to understand what they are doing and for what purposes. They can then value this for other areas of their lives, including both in the classroom and outside of it.

Finally, the concept of intellectual humility and its associated activities could also be a means of improving upon the University of Hertfordshire’s overall graduate attributes. In their current form the attributes are sweeping and general. They can be filled out in multiple ways but as I have argued, one way of filling them out is in terms of the implicit curriculum, and specifically, the acquisition of moral and intellectual virtues and character traits. Perhaps the university could develop a more specific programme that outlines how to apply the graduate attributes into different subject areas. My proposal here concerning intellectual humility and the particular ways of teaching it offers one example of how to achieve this.

1. **Summary**

We found that intellectual humility *inwardly* involves making a proper appraisal of one’s intellectual abilities whilst using this when deliberating and making practical decisions about how to act. *Outwardly*, it helps one to resist pursuing intellectual achievements purely for the purposes of achieving vain personal glory. Students can acquire intellectual humility through openness to others and their views, and hence the university provides an excellent space for cultivating intellectual humility. A way of facilitating this cultivation can be by augmenting, for a teacher’s own context, a learning technique like the Circle of Viewpoints. By intentionally including a technique such as this, we try to avoid having students who miss out on learning in lectures and seminars. This technique can be supplemented by asking students to have eye-contact with one-another, in line with the compassion in education literature. It can also be enhanced by modelling humility as the educator by getting involved in the learning activity, and by the teacher helping the students to explore their own learning of humility whilst in the classroom. These discoveries can be used to produce suggestions for how to concretise the University of Hertfordshire’s graduate attributes, and provides a clear way by which we can achieve the aims of the implicit curriculum for our students.

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