COMMENT

Teaching 'A' Level Philosophy

During the last academic year I co-taught the new Philosophy 'A' level to a group of students at Hackney College in London whose ages ranged from 18 to 35, though the majority were concentrated at the younger end of this age range. It was a one-year course - not an ideal arrangement, but the usual structure within my department for trying out new 'A' level subjects with a minimum resource risk.

The department was first approached about Philosophy 'A' level about three years ago and the response of the decision makers within the department was to dismiss it as irrelevant to our students (entirely working class, mostly black). It is a heartening sign of the rising tide of anxiety and alarm about undiluted vocationalism and instrumentalism in education (trends which threaten further education in Hackney more than in many other areas) that when we were next approached about Philosophy 'A' level, by now in an advanced state of preparation, some eighteen months later, the colleague and I who wished to organise and teach the course gained acceptance of our plan with the minimum of dissension.

I would like to make a few points arising from my experience of this teaching that relate, in part, to Stephen Brigley's earlier contribution and the response by Maurice Roche (RP 35, 38).

1. The debate about relevance

'Relevance' is increasingly used as a yardstick for measuring the value of a curriculum, but in such a simplified way that it has ceased to be understood in any careful and precise relationship to the complex and subtle needs of the learners. The debate has been largely concerned with the content of what is learned, neglecting to analyse the significance of the process of learning and its relationship to the endeavours of the students. At its best the process of learning encourages the development of a combative, inquisitive, skilful, confident and well harnessed approach to ideas and bodies of knowledge. None of us within the education system who wish to enhance the quality of people's lives (rather than be agents in the rigidification of existing class, ethnic and gender divisions) would doubt the relevance of this. I'm not suggesting that teachers work in an ideological vacuum - but the space between the contradictions remains even in the present political climate. I can hear the response of the undiluted 'relevance' supporters - yes, but that is likely to be far more effective when articulated with a content which is relevant to students' lives, which works from the frameworks they already possess. I am not in a polar opposite relation to that position, but I think there are more subtleties involved in discerning relevance than are commonly portrayed. One consideration is that, if learning is to advance and curiosity to be nurtured, those frameworks themselves will need to come under scrutiny. The second consideration is that it is simply patronising to assume that teachers can identify, other than in very broad terms (particularly prior to working with a specific group of students) what content is relevant to students. Stephen Brigley, for instance, clearly considers the issue of the existence of God as having little, if any, relation to present-day concerns. Let me assure him that the debate is alive and thriving amongst black, working class people in Hackney. The third point is that students like to broach new frontiers; they enjoy pushing beyond their experience and taking on the unknown. It augments their confidence, acts as a marker of progress. That's not to deny that they don't want to wrestle with the familiar too, perhaps in unfamiliar ways. They do - but they like a blend. One of the most attractive aspects of teaching 'A' level Philosophy this year has been that it facilitated such a blend of contents and process in a context which aimed to nurture both imagination and disciplined argument. For instance I found that coming to terms with Bishop Berkeley (part of the topic entitled 'Perception of the External World') limbered the students up for suspending the taken for granted and gave them practice in examining their own assumptions. This worked precisely because the content was emotionally remote and non-threatening, and yet it enabled us to set an ethos which paved the way for self questioning on a variety of issues on which their taken-for-granted ideas were more emotionally loaded - e.g., in the context of morality, suicide, abortion, and homosexuality. I used idealism to concentrate on the process of learning - the intention being that it would then be easier to hold on to during other topics. Another example arises from our reading of The German Ideology (one of our set texts). Most of the students arrived at the course with nebulous, blurred, generalised ideas about Marx and Marxism. Something like "Russia - communism - terrorism - uniforms - and all rather grim". They hadn't necessarily bought this image, it was often held at arm's length. But by and large it was all they had. Firstly students simply appreciate the luxury of studying a text closely, laying the foundations of a solid and well rooted understanding, and enjoying some liberation from what many of them experience as an intimidating lack of knowledge. Secondly, thety were struck (needing no nudge from me) by the relationship between what they read, and their own earlier preconceptions. The bones of the debate about the construction of consciousness were there in front of their eyes - very relevantly. And with a spin off way beyond this particular experience. The students that I teach often harbour a justified suspicion that they are somehow excluded from the benefits of education (and I don't in this case mean the instrumental benefits). To apply an over simplified criterion of relevance is to collaborate in that exclusion.

2. Philosophy as an elite subject

The second point I would like to raise is that the image of Philosophy as the preserve of the elite, even as "ideologically antithetical to the comprehensive ideal" (Stephen

Brigley) belies its potential as a relatively democratic subject. My intuition told me this prior to teaching the group but was confirmed and focused by my experience with them. First, the relative emphasis on the process of learning and thinking, rather than on the products of those activities, removes the focus from answers and the magical possession of such by the teachers and authors of books. Correspondingly the subject lends itself to a teaching role which primarily involves encouraging, structuring, guiding and systematising this learning process - rather than being the keeper of the truth. Secondly, this same emphasis encourages and facilitates the participation of students - because reasoned argument is the very substance of the course, in a way that no end-of-class summary can substitute for. A third argument in support of the potentially democratic nature of the subject relates to a point made by Maurice Roche in a previous contribution - morality, faith, reason - has as much significance for my students (albeit with a different skew) as for people from very different social backgrounds. One of the major resources required is curiosity on the part of the students - and this they bring in an abundance that at least matches that of any other social grouping.

So rather than collaborating in ensuring that Philosophy remains largely in the province of the educationally privileged (they are after all adept enough at holding on to those privileges without any help from me), I'd suggest that we press for a movement in the opposite direction - an opening up of thesubject to those hitherto excluded.

3. Teaching and learning strategies

I referred earlier to students' curiosity as a major resource in the Philosophy classroom. In order to harness that curiosity, to promote imagination and intellectual discipline in an optimum combination, other resources, additional to the students' curiosity, need to be mobilized. The teaching strategies that would most effectively encourage such mobilization would aim at:

(a) fostering enquiry, questioning and self questioning;

(b) encouraging participation in discussion and receptivity to the ideas of others;

(c) establishing sound technical skills (such as skimming for gist, blending material from a variety of sources, presenting reasoned arguments in essay form). Rich in curiosity my students might be, but in certain areas of basic skills often deeply impoverished;

(d) promoting a clear working structure which maximises imagination within a framework that doesn't squander it.

Let me cite one example where a combination of such strategies can effectively advance the learning of the students. The need to contextualise the set texts appeared in the contributions of both Stephen Brigley and Maurice Roche, in different ways. (I defy anyone to teach the course even half effectively withoutsuch a framework. The students would have remained, for instance, baffled by the Meditations and the significance of that text had it not been well woven into context. Nor would they have been slow to say so!) This requirement - the need to contextualise philosophers - seems to me an instance of an opportunity for students to do some extensive individual research - supported and guided, but not dictated to, and to come back and share and compare their information with one another.

Few of our students will go on to study philosophy (unless as part of a joint degree) in higher education. In this decision they will be guided, quite rightly, by a number of criteria, of which an interest in philosophy is only one. Vocational preparation in its best and honest sense has an important role to play in the further education and school curriculum. If what I have written seems to emphasise intellectual self development, that's not because I see that as standing in any simplistic opposition to other ingredients of the curriculum. Curriculum design should take as its starting point student needs - and intellectual development is just one of those. My aim here has been to touch on some of the potential benefits offered by the 'A' level Philosophy initiative. That the present syllabus and examination structure is not perfect there is no doubt. I would not expect it to be any more than I would expect my decisions about topics, materials and strategies to be perfect (they weren't). What is important is that we - the A.E.B., the syllabus designers, the examiners, the teachers - use these early experiences positively and build upon them.

Nadine Cartner

Ecology: The Subversive Science

Readers of Richard Sylvan's 'Critique of Deep Ecology' (RP40/41) may be interested in placing the issues raised there in a broad, historical context. There is no shortage of published research on the rise of the environmental sciences, but this generally adopts a highly technical and narrowly-focused perspective. The publication of Robert P. McIntosh's The Background to Ecology: concept and theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, xiii + 384pp, £30.00 hb) may therefore be greeted as a welcome exception on both counts. The study is accessible to the non-specialist, invitingly undogmatic, and broad in its ambitions. Here is the best available survey of the origins and development of ecology in the USA, Britain and Western Europe. It would appear, indeed, that only the large-scale study can hope to follow the emergence of ecology, for it appeared as a self-conscious science in the nineteenth century from a profoundly complex interaction of such domains as physiology, natural history, biogeography and biology. From its modern inception, ecology led a troubled, precarious life, knocking for admission on the doors of official science then, once let in, diffracting into a myriad of specialist sub-disciplines each with its own method, materials and area of investigation.

This no doubt sustains the criticism that ecology lacks a stable theoretical base (by which scientists mean a mathematical base). To this two things may be said. Firstly, as McIntosh points out, a purely formal framework would be too limiting to contain all the major lines of ecological research. But it does not necessarily follow, as McIntosh supposes, that ecologists alone must place their house in order, that only they can 'effectively address ecological questions' (p. 323). It is notable that some of the greatest advances in ecological thinking have occurred when the profound philosophical and political issues which always smoulder beneath technical deliberations are permitted to flare up into the open.

This is demonstrated when McIntosh turns to ecological developments during the 1960s and 1970s, when 'the subversive science' (as it was dubbed) challenged many of the most entrenched premisses of the Western political and economic consensus. To show that advanced technological societies are neither above nor beyond natural laws had a decisive impact on the socio-cultural consciousness, but also on the status and character of ecology itself. As Sylvan's work has shown by example, 'ecological philosophy' is no misnomer, but instead a way forward in the pursuit of what is useful in contemporary environmental science.

This second point, that ecology's search for a theoretical base may lead beyond its narrower boundaries, can be reinforced by examining the rise of that science in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution. Disappointingly little has been written in English on this subject; McIntosh nowhere refers to Soviet developments, though his bibliography mentions the Handbook of Contemporary Developments in World Ecology (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1981), edited by E. J. Kormondy and J. F. McCormick. This volume contains a brief chapter which surveys the progress of

Russian and Soviet biocenology (community ecology) to which is appended a bibliography of more than 500 items. This in itself reflects something of the richness and range of Soviet ecological thinking. The vital and pioneering period of research was during the 1920s and 1930s, when such figures as I. K. Pachoskii, V. N. Beklemishev, S. A. Severtsov and V. V. Stanchinskii were at the forefront of developments in the study of ecological communities. Such research has been sorely neglected by historians and scientists in the West; McIntosh discusses Raymond Lindeman's 'famous', 'landmark' paper on the tropic-dynamic aspect of ecology published in 1942, but neglects to recognise that Stanchinskii developed the paradigm a full decade earlier. Moreover, unlike Lindeman whose paper was initially rejected by Ecology, Stanchinskii's work was widely praised in the USSR and published immediately in Zhurnal ekologii i biotsenologii in 1931.

Ecology in the Soviet Union during this period was intimately connected with wideer political concerns and informed by philosophical considerations. Dialectical materialism was neither a luxury nor an imposition: ecologists found in Marxism a source of guidance, stimulation and methodological and moral principle. The claim of the ecologist G. A. Kozhevnikov that 'an understanding of nature forms the basis for a proper understanding of the world' would have found few dissenters and many willing and able to further the common ground between science and philosophy. What happened to the budding science of ecology in the mid-1930s is not yet completely clear, but the outlines tell a now-familiar story of the redefinition of science in accordance with Stalinist economic and political practices. These practices, and the principles by which they were justified, proved an insuperable barrier for holistic ecology. As Douglas Weiner, one of the few working on this subject, has written: 'Ecologist-conservationists, embracing the notions of "the web of life" and "the balance of nature" could not reconcile themselves to policies which they feared would sunder that web and disrupt that balance.' We still do not know enough to follow with accuracy the fate of those ecologists who refused conciliation with Stalinism, but this historical investigation would appear to be as full of instruction as is the philosophical work of those like Richard Sylvan.

Bibliographical note

McIntosh's volume contains an extensive bibliography, which does not however include sources on Soviet ecology. In the late 1930s, the British ecologist J. Richard Carpenter, assisted by Charles Elton and working from information supplied by the Soviet ecologist V. A. Alpatov, compiled a detailed review of Soviet developments in community ecology entitled 'Recent Russian Work on Community Ecology', Journal of Animal Ecology, VIII, 1939, pp. 354-86. The study referred to in the article above is by W. Carter Johnson and Norman R. French, and appears as 'Soviet Union', on pages 343-83 of Handbook of Contemporary Developments in World Ecology. The information on Soviet ecology in the note above derives from a paper by Douglas Weiner published in Isis 75, 1985, pp. 668-83.

Mike Shortland

American Philosophy

I was pleased to read David Watson's 'American Philosophy: R.I.P.', depicting the Royal Institute of Philosophy's lecture series on American Philosophy as an implicit search for the essence or exceptionalist character of American philosophy. The opposing approach, represented by Bruce Kuklick, David Hollinger, Mary Furner, Dorothy Ross, Thomas Haskell and David Noble, focuses on institutional factors such as professionalism's influence on philosophic discourse, alternatives to traditional ways of picturing American philosophy, identifying communities of discourse and careful theses on the relation of professional ideas and public discourse. Watson applauds this contextualist/historicist approach that seeks to interpret ideas within their cultural context.

The disparaging feature of both the R.I.P.'s search for the 'spirit of American philosophy' and the opposing contextualist/historicist approach is that both are trapped in a discourse structured in such a way as to be implicitly supportive of racial bias. Neither school takes account of the second largest body of American philosophic literature - works by Afro-Americans. What would be radical is if the debate between essentialist and contextualist were not strictured by both identifying philosophically interesting works as works by whites and about any issue other than racism.

Leonard Harris