

Ordinary Language Analysis in Teaching the Philosophy of Education

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A continuing issue in the teaching of philosophy to undergraduates is making a case for its relevance. I have discovered that it is not simply enough to stipulate that philosophical thinking is a helpful adjunct to critical thinking, but that such a claim needs to be demonstrated in rather concrete ways. Such student-centered demands are not at all unreasonable, given the twin factors of a stagnant employment outlook and rising tuition. In a conventional sense of “pragmatism”, then, students are now much more interested in the possible “payoff” value of philosophical inquiry.

This situation is especially true in the “case study” to be analyzed below. To contextualize, I have been responsible for teaching an undergraduate course in the philosophy of education. While the course is open to philosophy majors, most of the clientele are teacher education majors who are required to take the course by State mandate as a part of the certification process. This situation becomes especially challenging since even though they have all had one or two philosophy courses as part of their “core” requirement, they see little if any practical value for this type of course in terms of their future work.

To counter (as much as possible) this attitude, I try to structure the course as one in critical thinking and writing skills, arguing that possessing such skills will (partially) assist them in becoming more effective teachers. Adapting this point of view is, at times, not popular with either education or philosophy colleagues who believe that a “systems” approach (Ozman & Cramer, 1981) is the proper direction for teaching such a course. That is, the approach above attempts to outline some of the major “isms”, e.g., idealism, realism, pragmatism, marxism, etc., and then make “applications” to educational issues and practices. Having found this approach rather unwieldy, I have always opted for a different type of “critical thinking” approach grounded in Analytic Philosophy (e.g., Miller & Fredericks, 1985, 1987) and, specifically, utilizing John Wilson’s (1987), *Thinking with Concepts* as the primary text. The use of this text is prefaced by a brief history of modern analytic philosophy focusing, in as least technical way as possible, on the central ideas of the “latter” Wittgenstein. The transition from more formal analytic philosophy to analytic philosophy of education can easily be made by reference to works by Green (1971), Peters (1973), and Scheffler (1960), to mention only a few. Green’s (1971) work, now out of print, employs many of the philosophical concepts I have found useful, but students have found his extended and fine-grained distinctions on such issues as “knowing how” vs “knowing that” too removed from their eventual practice. The same holds true for Ennis’ (1969) influential early volume, *Logic in Teaching*, which, if it can still be found, is more suitable for graduate level courses. Finally, some of the ideas I will be discussing can be found in Miller (1984a, b) but go beyond these discussions in terms of using a more direct “Wilsonian” approach.

II.

Now, the specific **philosophical** concepts that form a part of this version of critical thinking related to philosophy of education are as follows: (1) necessary and sufficient conditions, (2) “if-then” conditional thinking, and (3) linking, schematizing and diagramming concepts. While teaching on other concepts, such as deductive and inductive arguments, I have found some variation of the above three has proven to be most useful in facilitating the type of Wilsonian critical thinking in which I am interested. Wilson’s “model case” is especially useful in attempting to illustrate the pragmatic value of the necessary-sufficient distinction. Thus, once having established (from Wilson) what constitutes a **genuine** question of concept, the building of a model case (i.e.,

if anything, this question of concept is certainly **this**) can be facilitated by teaching the necessary sufficient distinction. For example, some questions of concept directly related to the analytic philosophy of education would be:

- (1) What is teaching?
- (2) What is an effective teacher?
- (3) What is learning?
- (4) What is an effective school?
- (5) What is a fair student evaluation?
- (6) What is the difference between treating students equitably and equally?

Simply using the process of formulating a so-called question of concept engages one in beginning critical thinking. Most students do not initially see this, believing, for instance, that a question such as (2) can be easily and directly “answered.” At this point, it is also possible to introduce the philosophical concepts of **ambiguity, vagueness and begging -the-question**. The last is especially useful in getting students to think about the complexity of language-in-use. Thus, students eventually come to realize that the very concepts they have taken for granted, e.g., “learning”, “teaching”, are the very ones that need to be clarified.

In attempting to relate how the necessary and sufficient distinction applies, I often use higher cap letters to designate various concepts and begin with examples from the natural or biological sciences (see Hospers, 1976, for good examples). One simple example might be to determine a **necessary** condition (once it is explained what one is) for “life” on this planet. The distinctions of sufficiency (but not necessity), both necessity and sufficiency and neither necessity nor sufficiency are then explained and illustrated.

Another insight usually occurs when students realize the relationship of **applying** the necessary and sufficient distinction is a function of the clarity and precision of the definition of the concept itself. That is, if a concept such as “learning” is ambiguous and vague (I have them try to define it on their own), it is very difficult to apply precise necessary and/or sufficient conditions. At this point, I also sometimes introduce **types** of definitions (Manicas & Kruger, 1976) and, very briefly, some mention of how the classical theory of “natural kinds” was thought to work (Quine, 1969). Other interesting conceptual questions can be used, of course. One that has stimulated critical thinking has been, “what is a family?”

The complexity of the analysis should be left to the instructor and the assessment of the particular class. For example, if a more in-depth analysis is thought to be appropriate, the concept of “learning” can be differentiated in many ways. The instructor may want to draw a distinction between “learning that” (i.e., “propositional” learning) and “learning how,” and then attempt to compare the necessary and sufficient conditions that may apply to each distinction. Another fairly complex variation is to “link” or “schematize” concepts related to the philosophy of education and then “test” the utility of the necessary and sufficient distinction. Some illustrations are given below:

(1) “Learning”		“Knowing”
N/S	<----->	N/S
(2) “Learning that”		“Knowing that”
N/S	<----->	N/S
(3) “Learning” “Knowing”		“Understanding”
N/S	<----->	N/S

For example, in (3) the concept of “understanding” is introduced in the “learning” and “knowing” discussion. Often critical thinking is stimulated by asking students to compare and contrast their (initial) definitions of the terms, or asking something like, “are all cases of ‘learning’ cases of ‘understanding’?” Or, again, it is possible to see if they can come up with necessary and/or sufficient conditions for such phrases as “knowing how” and “understanding how” and then compare (the double arrow in (1)-(3) above indicates a comparison) their meanings.

Additional variations on this theme would be to see if the necessary and sufficient distinctions apply to the

terms themselves. I often use the following kinds of questions: (l) “Is learning a N or S condition for knowing?”, (b) “Is learning a N or S condition for understanding?”, and so forth through the various combinations. Thus, if a student makes an “argument” that, “learning is a necessary condition for understanding,” I ask why he/she is making this claim. I also then ask for the logical “status” of the other term, i.e., does “understanding” now serve as a sufficient condition for “learning?” If so, why? If not, why not? Here the idea of “conditions” can be introduced.

Using various combinations of the above can produce an interesting Socratic dialogue with rather deep critical thinking. Yet, it should be used cautiously. In my own experience I have found it can lead to anxiety and confusion, especially if students have not been previously exposed to conceptual analysis. At times, extreme skepticism can also be a by-product of this kind of analysis. This should be avoided while encouraging a “healthy” questioning skepticism. What I try to emphasize, however, in all these examples is the complexity of language itself and how this complexity figures into our “representations” of who we are and what (as teachers/future teachers) we will be doing.

III.

As can be seen, conceptual analysis as critical thinking, within the philosophy of education, can vary in many complex ways. What I have found useful in doing this type of analysis is to give the students some guidelines as strategies. They are intended to serve as a rough “template” to begin to do Wilsonian conceptual analysis. A fairly detailed example of one such strategy is given below with an accompanying diagram.

BEGINNING STRATEGIES FOR DOING CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

1. Make sure you have an actual question or concept.
2. Begin with either a lexical or stipulative definition, or with examples of how the concept would be used in “ordinary language.”
3. Write out the definition(s) of your concept.
4. See if any of the terms in the definition(s) are either vague or ambiguous; if there are some such terms, start thinking of how to clarify them.
5. On a separate sheet of paper start jotting how any ideas, points, distinctions and/or strategies that you might think would be useful in the analysis.
6. Begin thinking how you might build a MODEL CASE for the concept, keeping in mind the NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT DISTINCTION.
7. Think about what your opening sentence might sound like.
8. After you have jotted down various ideas, think about making an outline, or put the points in some type of order you may want to follow (e.g., Wilson’s cases).
9. Start writing a rough draft of your conceptual essay.
10. Eventually, write a final product.

EXAMPLE:

“What is an Effective Teacher?”

1. Is it a question of concept? Probably so, since the terms “teacher” and “effective” probably go beyond standard definitions of those terms.

2. Here are some questions that I may want to raise (and jot down) as a way of beginning my thinking about the concept.

(a) Should I stipulate some standard definition of “teacher?” Probably “yes”, since I do not really want to talk about such things as “parents” or “gurus”, or “computers” being teachers.

(b) I just may simply want to say that a “teacher” is someone who has a college degree, is properly certified, etc.

(c) What could the term “effective” possibly mean?

- Do I need a lexical definition here? Would it help?
- Could “effective” be something like “competent?”
- This seems to hold some possibilities, so maybe I should start thinking about this. (d) What senses of “competent” might there be?
- Competent in subject matter?
 - Competent in communication skills? - Competent in one area, but not in another?
 - Competent because of a certain g.p.a. the teacher has, simply because she has a degree?
 - Competent because she has passed a competency exam?
- (e) The idea of COMPETENCE seems to be relevant for the conceptual question, so you might want to continue thinking along these lines.

Also, could a teacher be considered “partially” or “totally” competent? Where will this strategy take me? Should I pursue it?

- (f) Do I need to think about any Related Cases that could be relevant here? For instance, if I am talking about “competency”, do I need to introduce the idea of “intelligence?” That is, is a teacher ordinarily considered more competent if she is more intelligent?
- If I go along with this idea, do I want to say that competence as ability might vary by where or whom a teacher teaches? That is, does competency, in this sense, differ between elementary, high school and special education teachers, for instance?
 - (g) Maybe I need to back and simply say that all competent teachers must have some type of “minimal” competence, but beyond this there can be all kinds of variability (Social Context Case)?
 - (h) What else do I need to consider?
 - Do I need to bring students into the picture? That is, should a competent teacher be one who is judged by how well her students do?
 - If I go this way, do I need to say something about how students should be evaluated (e.g., standardized tests?); how many of them need to reach a certain level?; or “how” smart they are, to begin with? In other words, is student performance either a necessary or sufficient condition for judging a teacher to be competent?

Now at this stage, it is up to you to write an essay in which you attempt to “answer” your conceptual question. How you “answer” it is ultimately left up to you. What I (and other analytic philosophers) would be looking for is how well you have explored the “logical domain” of the question.

- Have you drawn any distinctions?
- Have you shown the concept is complex?
- Have you tried to write about this complexity?
- Have you at least tried to draw some tentative conclusions about the concept?

In sum, these “beginning strategies” are a means of stimulating critical thinking among students. The direction of these considerations can also be diagrammed as indicated in the figure. There are, of course, many other possible directions in terms of conceptual analysis. I will briefly mention one additional one with which I have had some success. In analyzing the term “knowing” and its relation to “learning,” I often refer to Scheffler’s (1965) standard account of the “conditions” of knowledge. I explain these generally and their importance in the “learning-knowing” but then focus on the “adequate evidence” condition for propositional knowledge. The idea here is not to give complex epistemological overviews (e.g., Moser, 1991) or the many problematic issues within so-called “confirmation theory” (e.g., Achinstein, 1983), but rather to have students come to realize both how complex and how central the issue of “evidence” is to a variety of education-related issues. (Incidentally, a very good question of concept is, “what is evidence?”). For example, if the student chooses to write on the conceptual question, “what is an effective school?”, there must be some discussion as to what counts (i.e., evidence) at such a school. That is, what type(s) of evidence would one need to indicate school X is effective? (see, Miller, 1994). One might also ask, to stimulate additional critical thinking, if such evidence is necessary or sufficient?

Across several years of teaching the philosophy of education course, I have found that these techniques

and strategies are successful in developing a keen awareness for the importance of this type of critical thinking. This approach also fosters a “dialogic feedback loop” whereby both students and instructors **must** react to one another. These strategies do not lend themselves well to the traditional lecture-style format. Lastly, these techniques enhance the writing ability of students, forcing them to be clear and precise in making their case for a question of concept.

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