



Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching General Category

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“I still love doing Philosophy and enjoy introducing students to that sense of wonder that hooked me so many years ago.”

The idea that Philosophy is some sort of secret knowledge of how the world works, and that he could use it to shape his life, struck Nick as a 13-year-old after he read the English translation of Jostein Gaarder’s novel *Sophie’s World*. When he went to university in 2000 and had the chance to study Philosophy, he was not disappointed. Now, he enjoys introducing his students to the same sense of wonder. To Nick, Philosophy is social, and “the fun is the debate, the argument, the forgetting what you were meant to be doing as you spend hours exploring how an argument unfolds when you sit down and talk it through with your friends, colleagues, or classmates”. He also believes philosophy can effectively be taught and learnt online and has been teaching predominantly online since 2018. He takes pride in turning online classes into social spaces, creating and fostering the small, incidental spaces and opportunities for effective learning that often happens naturally in physical classrooms. This helps students in his classes develop a sense of community that enables them to learn well together.

As Philosophy isn’t an NCEA subject, most of Nick’s students come into their first Philosophy class with no real idea of what it will entail. He says excellent Philosophy teaching has to be done with enthusiasm and feature interesting and engaging material. This material has to be topical and relevant to students, so they recognise its value, both immediately and as part of their development as people. This is especially true for most of his students who don’t intend to be professional philosophers. Nick believes the analytic, critical, and creative skills of a philosopher will stand anyone in good stead, regardless of their chosen path. And giving students a clear expectation of what they expect to learn in a course, and how they will know they have learned it, creates a motivation to learn these things, not merely in order to complete the course, but for reasons personal to themselves. Further, giving students ownership of their learning, so they choose to become Philosophers, helps makes them want to keep doing it.

When Nick started doing more online teaching and had to work out how to recreate the fun social interaction that made him fall in love with Philosophy, he developed the forums he now uses. These encourage people to craft careful arguments, and reward those who do so with positive, considered contributions from their fellow classmates. Teaching in the online space required Nick to embrace new strategies, materials and methods. He believes engagement follows from enthusiasm – if a student cares about the subject, they will spend more time on it, and learn more from it. His aim is to foster that commitment. He strives to create the same infectious enthusiasm in online lectures that he finds comes easily to in-person lectures. He keeps a file of news articles, pictures, cartoons and other material that reflects on or illustrates the material he teaches, so that he can always demonstrate why the content they are covering matters, and how it is relevant to the ‘real world’. The

same applies to the tone of content delivery – he has found that a conversational style dramatically increases student engagement.

As Nick’s course design and delivery has to be responsive to multiple factors, such as class size, whether in-person or online, and the needs of a varied cohort of students, he has to be flexible. For example, rather than recording lectures for online courses, he now uses lessons which allow him to mix text, video, and images, in a self-paced, click-through format through the university’s learning management system Moodle. Students report a preference for lessons over lectures, and the completion rate for lessons (consistently over 90% throughout his online courses) far exceeds rates of lecture attendance. Nick’s courses attract students from a wide range of backgrounds, many of whom have never studied Philosophy before. In order to engage these students he needs to appeal to their interests. Nearly a quarter of his students are Māori or Pasifika, so he tailors the content to their concerns, such as using concepts like *kaitiakitanga* and *manaakitanga* in environmental ethics.

Nick’s students are encouraged to interact with both the teaching team and each other, building and sharing their knowledge and understanding of the content. He uses different engagement methods for different formats, such as embedding questions in Moodle lessons to track engagement, encouraging active participation by all students and sending personal emails in the first weeks of his courses to offer help or congratulate. He finds that scaffolded learning helps students work their way through the material, enabling them to benefit from their previous work and recognise the connections that are being formed. Nick wants students to leave his classes with a new set of tools that will benefit them throughout their lives. He tries to instil passion in them for the material, and to ensure that they know how the things they learn will help them going forward.

Nick has engaged in a range of outreach initiatives both within the university and at academic conferences. With his colleagues Stephanie Gibbons and Ruth Walker he ran a workshop called *Let’s Teach Students a Lesson*, encouraging other academics to explore and utilise Moodle lessons in their teaching practice. He also presented *Making Forums Work – for students and you* at the 2019 Learnfest (annual conference run by the Centre for Tertiary Teaching and Learning at the University of Waikato), which analysed his innovative approach to forums in large online courses. In 2020 he and Dan Weijers wrote and presented *Philosophy as a Vehicle for Significant Learning Experiences* at the 2020 New Zealand Association of Philosophers Annual Conference. This article is now under review at *Teaching Philosophy*. In 2018 he delivered the keynote address and judged for the Waikato Secondary Schools Philothon, which brought together students from Years 9–13 from eight schools to do some philosophy, for many, for the first time. From 2012 until 2018 Nick taught a secondary schools version of PHIL0106, his introductory moral and political philosophy paper. He visited schools in Waikato (Sacred Heart College, Raglan Area School), Auckland (Western Springs), and the Bay of Plenty (Tauranga Boys College, Matamata) to work with high school students doing advanced placement into first year university courses.

His teaching has been recognised at both the divisional and University level. In 2016 he was awarded an early career academic excellence award, and in 2020 he received a Divisional Teaching Excellence Award, the Nola Campbell Memorial eLearning Excellence Award, and the University’s supreme award, the Vice-Chancellor’s Medal for Staff Excellence in recognition of his teaching, particularly online teaching during the pandemic.

“The analytic, critical, and creative skills of a philosopher will stand anyone in good stead, regardless of their chosen path, so prompting students to recognise the value in these skills is a way of helping them lead happier, more fulfilling lives.