

PhilSkills: A Skill-Based Approach to Teaching Philosophy

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1. Introduction

The skills needed to succeed in a standard philosophy course include identifying, reconstructing, evaluating, and constructing arguments while reading, talking about, and writing about philosophical and other ideas. Call these “PhilSkills.”

This short essay outlines and advocates a skill-based approach to teaching philosophy.

2. Growth Mindset

The philosophy classroom can be an intimidating and alienating place. Philosophical writing is often complex and jargony, and undergraduates frequently express concerns over their ability to understand philosophy and to think, talk, and write “like a philosopher.” These worries might stem, in part, from a belief that success in philosophy requires raw, innate talent.¹

A skill-based approach to teaching philosophy helps assuage these worries by fostering a growth mindset. It communicates to the students that their abilities are expected to grow and improve *over time*, with repeated practice. Growth mindset is associated with improved motivation and overall performance and reduced anxiety in academic settings.²

A good way to further nurture and reinforce the mindset is to invite your students to periodically reflect on their development. By identifying challenges and areas of improvement, students take an active role in their own educational journey.

¹ Leslie et al. 2015.

² On mindsets, motivation, and success, see Dweck 2000 and 2006.

3. Inclusive and Equitable Practice

A skill-based approach to teaching is an inclusive and equitable practice.

Each student comes to philosophy with a unique set of strengths, challenges, expectations, and past experiences. By explicitly teaching PhilSkills you can avoid having to make assumptions about your students' prior knowledge or preparation. Combining workshops and active learning tasks with low-stakes assignments invites students to gradually develop and refine their PhilSkills. This approach not only helps level the playing field but also fosters a sense of belonging, ideally empowering *all* students to participate meaningfully in philosophical inquiry.

4. Skills and course content

Explicitly teaching PhilSkills does not have to take time away from teaching course content; in fact, it can enhance your students' engagement with the material. By designing interactive workshops and active learning tasks that integrate examples, case studies, or topics directly related to the course content, instructors can ensure that skill development and content mastery occur hand in hand, in mutually reinforcing ways. For example, teaching how to reconstruct arguments can be combined with analyzing a course text. Similarly, a topic already (partially) covered in class can be used for discussion practice.

This approach not only deepens students' grasp of the material but also equips students with transferable tools for engaging with new content, facilitating a more holistic learning experience that strengthens both conceptual understanding and practical capabilities.

5. Sample Workshops and Active Learning Tasks

This section presents a selection of simple PhilSkills workshops and associated active learning tasks. These examples can be adapted to suit the specific needs of your students or replaced with alternatives that align more closely with your teaching goals.

5.1 DEALING WITH ARGUMENTS

Workshop: Introduce key concepts (argument, premise, conclusion, statement, validity, soundness, inductive, deductive, etc.) and provide examples of valid and invalid (and/or strong and weak) argument forms.³ To facilitate engagement and understanding, make the workshop interactive by employing online polling tools and/or Think-Pair-Share.⁴

Sample active learning tasks:

1. Argument modification. Groups of students come up with their own versions of an argument covered in class and create visual illustrations. A suitable argument uses an example that can be easily substituted for a new one (*e.g.*, Hume’s argument from perceptual variation). This activity allows students to deeply engage with a specific argument.
2. Argument reconstruction. Students discuss their individual reconstructions of the main argument from a class reading in small groups.⁵ The groups then create new reconstructions based on these discussions. The reconstructions are shared with the rest of the class and constructively critiqued. This activity allows students to practice identifying and reconstructing arguments expressed in philosophical and other writing.

5.2 READING PHILOSOPHY

Workshop: Explain that reading philosophy involves engaging with ideas and arguments carefully, critically, and charitably. Describe what students should look for: key claim(s), key argument(s), defenses of premises, key terms and their definitions, etc.⁶ Use a close reading of a short text to model and practice.

³ A useful resource here is the “Argument Analysis” module of the [Critical Thinking Web](#).

⁴ For example, [Poll Everywhere](#) is a simple polling application that allows you to create and share polls with students to frame a discussion or check understanding. Think-Pair-Share is a straightforward learning activity that works well in philosophy classrooms of various sizes. In this activity, students first **think** individually about a topic/question/ problem, then discuss the same topic/question/problem in **pairs**, and finally **share** their ideas with the rest of the class.

⁵ Give students adequate time to complete their reconstructions and a chance to ask you questions. Ideally, the first part of this task should be done as a homework assignment (either ungraded or graded pass/fail), and only *after* students have had sufficient practice with guided argument reconstruction in class. For resources on argument reconstruction, see, *e.g.*, Lamb or Dowden 2024, Section 2.6.

⁶ *E.g.*, Fassio 2017, Pryor 2006, Jacquart, and Khalifa.

Sample active learning tasks:

1. Key ideas. Groups are assigned paragraphs from a class reading. Each group notes down the key idea from each of their paragraphs in a *single sentence*. Groups then read aloud their paragraphs and their sentences with feedback from other students.
2. Mind maps. Using a template, students create mind maps of a class reading and post those mind maps on the course discussion board online. Encourage the use of colors, symbols, drawings, and notes.

5.3 TALKING PHILOSOPHY

Workshop: Elicit students' thoughts on the purposes and goals of philosophy class discussions (working together to clarify difficult concepts, deepen understanding, etc.).⁷ Then introduce (with examples) basic discussion moves in philosophy: agree/disagree with reasons, introduce an example/thought experiment, ask for clarification, take stock, reveal a hidden assumption, etc.

Sample active learning tasks:

1. Discussion moves #1. Groups discuss a topic previously covered in class. Each group gets a deck of cards and students take turns to “play” a card.⁸ This is followed by a discussion of which moves were the most difficult to play and why. This activity allows students to practice discussion participation in a fun, low-stakes setting.⁹
2. Discussion moves #2. Groups write down eleven discussion moves and number them from two to twelve. They then discuss a class topic by taking turns to roll two dice and “play” a move corresponding to the sum of the dice. This activity allows students to revisit the discussion moves introduced earlier and to introduce new ones.

5.4 WRITING PHILOSOPHY

Workshop: Explain that the goal of an argumentative philosophy paper is to offer a reasoned defense of a claim. Introduce the basic structure of an argumentative philosophy paper:

⁷ Students should have a clear understanding of the norms of philosophy class discussions. Instructors can either compile a list of ground rules (for inspiration, see, e.g., Chalmers 2017) or have the class come up with their own community guidelines.

⁸ See Mortensen 2021.

⁹ Sample discussion moves are available here: <https://www.tiinarosenqvist.com/teaching>

introduction with unambiguous thesis statement, argument with careful defense of premises, objection(s), response(s) to the objection(s), short conclusion, and bibliography.¹⁰

Sample active learning tasks:

1. Gallery walk.¹¹ Rotating from one “station” (*e.g.*, a section of whiteboard) to the next, groups write down (i) a valid argument in support of a thesis, (ii) an objection to another group's argument and (iii) a response to an objection to a third argument. The entire class then discusses (some of) these mini dialogues, adding examples, definitions, and support for premises. This activity allows students to practice outlining their papers.
2. Grading papers. Groups grade two short sample papers written by the instructor (one paper should be more “flawed” than the other) using a grading rubric. They then share their grades and reasons for those grades with the rest of the class. This activity allows students to develop the metacognitive skills required to evaluate their own writing.

6. Conclusion

A skill-based approach to teaching philosophy not only equips students with the tools to engage critically and confidently with complex ideas but also fosters a safer, more inclusive and equitable learning environment. By explicitly teaching PhilSkills through interactive workshops and active learning tasks, we can demystify philosophical practice and cultivate a growth mindset.

References

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¹⁰ Useful resources for students include Pryor 2012, Weinberg 2018, and Vargas 2022. See also Mendelovici's (2017) annotated sample paper.

¹¹ For more ideas on how to use gallery walk as a teaching tool, see Alber 2016.

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