How to Make Philosophy Interesting for Non-Specialists?

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Abstract

The 21 century is a leading knowledge-paradigm. Information and information and communication technologies (ICTs) that deliver knowledge are essential and dominating our everyday lives. Improvement and dissemination of digital technology provides new opportunities for reading, writing, communication, analyzing information, creating and sharing knowledge and opens up new areas for learning.

The paper presents the constructivist paradigm that gives priority to the cultivation according to students' own needs. On the other hand it describes and analyzes the Moodle system, which is based on this philosophy. The study is based on the author's teaching practices and includes the synthesis of survey and SWOT analysis.

Philosophy as a discipline in the higher education for people who have studied in different areas is very difficult. The students don't accept the specific philosophical language. That's why I must try to make lectures and discussions interesting. I use presentations, students read philosophical texts and analyze them and discus their problems in the light of contemporary philosophy.

1 Challenges to philosophy

The contemporary challenges we face are globalization, the crisis in all its dimensions–financial, economic and above all spiritual, cultural diversity, ethical and cognitive dimensions of social, ethnic and religious tensions worldwide. Seeking answers to the arising issues and conflicts, we necessarily turn to philosophy.

The mission of the social and human sciences programme, one of UNESCO's five major programmes, is to advance knowledge, standards and intellectual cooperation in order to facilitate social transformations conducive to the universal values of justice, freedom and human dignity. At the 35th session of UNESCO's General Conference held in October 2009, its 193 Member States emphasised its significance, enjoining the Social and Human Sciences Sector (SHS) to respond to the economic, financial and environmental crisis and study its ethical implications [1].

1.1 Problems of Contemporary education in Philosophy

Philosophy is a human need, which is not genetically encoded in us, but must be moved and taught, but this is only possible in our communication with it. No philosophy can decide for people's specific problems, but may stimulate their own spiritual activity.

In recent decades Philosophy has lost its authority as universal knowledge and its influence over social paradigms. Philosophy has been highly professionalized having performed a proliferation of different philosophical directions, currents and positions, leading to the loss of one aspect of philosophy. This professionalization and specialization has led to the creation of many new philosophical disciplines, each of which speaks its own specific language. Each community creates its own jargon, which can hardly be understood by non-experts and even members of other philosophical groups sometimes. The philosophy closes itself in a Babylonian Tower and in some sense becomes marginal and esoteric.

The education system in the Bulgarian high school does not stimulate the love of wisdom (from Greek language - φιλοσοφια, from φιλεῖν - love and σοφία - wisdom). The philosophy as a discipline is taught in 11th grade once a week (in ninth grade studying "Psychology" twice a week; in the 10th - "Ethics and Law" two times a week). Moreover, 57% of my students enrolled in my course have never studied philosophy. It is not enough to form a philosophical worldview and philosophical culture.

1.2 My experience

In the new situation, where there aren't leading cultural interests, issues of utility of the Philosophy have always excited people, who meet philosophy for the first time. My students often ask me: "Why should I study philosophy?" or "How will philosophy help me in my life?"

In my opinion, everyone should find their own reason for studying philosophy, she/he needs to have motivation. Philosophy is based on freedom. It needs freedom.

My main thesis of the course "Contemporary trends in philosophy" is that philosophy should be engaged with the contemporary processes, ideas, and if you like even with the crisis. While in ancient times philosophy could have an independent life, nowadays it is more closely associated with modernity, with what is happening around us - such as social engagement of philosophers today is to analyze globalization and related issues, difficulties and contradictions – Globalization as cultural shock (Jean Baudrillard), Philosophy at the time of terror (Giovanni Boradori, Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida).

During the seminars of philosophy it is not taught in the traditional sense of teaching. I give students specific topics and the most important is to create an environment for asking questions, seeking to correct in asking. Dialogs, communication and Socratic discourse are dominant in the course Contemporary trends in philosophy".

Students form active knowledge when constructing their own meaningful wholes and meanings. Knowledge occurs when passing through personal experience. For the purpose of teaching the course on "Contemporary trends in philosophy" self-study, reading texts, formulation of questions are required. The emphasis should fall not on the particular philosophical doctrines, but on philosophical thinking in the context of a reality with its relations and connections with it.

The formulation of problems is not an easy task and requires the students' thought on the separation of sensory and standing on one removed, critical-reflexive stance on the world and sensory experience.

Despite bearing the accumulation of historical knowledge the contemporary philosophical ideas are born in specific social and cultural conditions.

2 Necessity of Philosophy

Seeking the meaning of philosophy and its purpose in the present, it is necessary to focus on its impact on the life of students. What could the philosophy give non-specialists?
In general we can speak of social, cognitive, individual and educational needs of philosophy.
Social needs of Philosophy
Philosophy serves as explanatory matrix, such as worldview, as ideology and helps us to feel comfortable in the world. Philosophy should be a foundation. It sets out the basic cultural and value-regulatory systems of society, morals, ethics, religion, politics... Philosophy explains the world, but it sets aims and can offer individual and collective goals, rules, and strategies for change. It offers us models to follow and trust.

Cognitive needs of Philosophy
Philosophy's cognitive function was to legitimate knowledge and truth. It is necessary to seek a new heuristic knowledge and innovation.

Individual existential needs
One needs a certain "final" answer to the world around them and then turn to philosophy. The need comes also from a purely intellectual curiosity, from striving for self-perfection and necessity to make sense of the deepest bases of the processes that surround us. Philosophy satisfies the psychological need of people to find meaning in things around them.

Educational needs
Philosophy offers ideas and positions. It can change people and shapes the way that they perceive things. Accumulated philosophical knowledge forms our worldview paradigm within which we solve problems, think and act. The study of history of philosophy has instrumental value. By introducing to students different solutions to the same cases with different worldview positions they could produce tools and benchmarks for themselves and the problems they face.

3 Constructivist paradigm

3.1 Constructivist paradigm in education

The progress of highly developed information technology changed not only the type of knowledge, understanding its mechanisms, generation and implementation, but also creates new communicative needs of learners.

The Constructivist paradigm is increasingly beginning to establish itself in the field of education. Constructivism is based on the idea of the learner's active role in the process of acquiring knowledge. One of the key principles of constructivism is that learners absorb information in accordance with their personal interests and needs. According to constructivism, people construct new knowledge while interacting with the environment.

Everything you read, watch, listen to, feel and touch is tested by our basic knowledge and where appropriate, our mentality may form new knowledge in our country. We do not passively perceive the information that we are supplied with and do not store it in our memory in a bottomless pit. Knowledge increases, if we can use it successfully in our own environment, i.e. if it is deemed necessary. Training is more effective when others convey knowledge from their own experience.

For example, during the seminars in Philosophy the students read a text repeatedly and try to explain the idea of someone else in their own words. Then they achieve the effect of remembering the essence of the text and integrating it into their life experiences.

The problems of the universal and the variable in human knowledge (analytical philosophy), of the fundamental human's values (philosophy of Slavoj Zizek), the theme of Power (Michel Foucault), of Love (Erich Fromm), a Paradoxical Happiness (Gilles Lipovetski), of Death (Alber Camus) are more fundamental and we consider them in the seminars as an attempt to make sense of our own existence.

"Themselves issues - says Bulgarian philosopher Vasil Prodanov - arise again, but every time the context is different. In this sense, philosophers can discover the fundamental in any social problem of the day and they can offer their answers, enriched by history, knowledge and specific circumstances" [2].

Therefore, as one of my duties, I moderate the discussion, trying to present the context in which to generate a specific philosophical topic, to give examples in presentations with examples of architecture, cinema, music, culture.

Philosophy and its teaching must adapt to the new circumstances related to the dynamics of social processes and the need for new rules of conduct in various areas.

The opportunities that training in philosophy opens up are in different directions: training can help students clarify for themselves what they know, would enable them to distinguish between essence and phenomenon; to recognize implicitly present conditions, as well as best of a bad reason, to think sequentially, to criticize the ideas of others as well as their own, to have a wealth of different perspectives, etc.

The constructivist model I use relies on mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation. It also provokes critical thinking, promotes the individual construction of knowledge, interactivity and more. I stick to the idea that there is always more than one interpretation of a topic, my responsibility is to lead the discussion, to stimulate and guide the topic does not extend beyond the overall framework.

My experience is to bring together issues and conflicting situations to provoke reflection. I try not to impose my views as the institution that always speaks the truth, but rather suggest that my opinion is one of the options and encourage them to search for alternatives. In this sense, we share a common responsibility to achieve authenticity. My role is one of a mediator of knowledge.

Notably through dialogue I lay the foundations of equality in the discussion of specific cases. Through discursive symmetrical interactive situation I look for understanding and learning through activity. Just what goes into our reflection, enters into our arsenal of knowledge. I expect that the students must be active subjects who solve problems, making them subject to verification by using strategies to seek understanding to construct their knowledge and adapt it to each new situation.

Learning through discussion, through shared experiences of colleagues, through interaction makes it possible to improve the quality of absorption of material. The interaction between students is realized also on-line by an exchanging of their opinions through the network, through Internet communication. The teacher is also involved, but he/she is more in the role of a mediator.

The selection of topics for discussion is in accordance with the interests of students: for example, communication in cyberspace excites almost all young people, and friendship in the Facebook. Therefore, when the students discuss these topics they are remarkably active.

3.2 Constructivism as a philosophy of Moodle

The constructivist idea underlies also of philosophy in the open platform Moodle. „Moodle" is organized as a computer course and is oriented towards collaboration of students and their teachers, where knowledge is actively constructed by all participants. Moodle is an abbreviation of Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment and it can be used as e-learning, for online courses and for providing educational activities.

As you know, Moodle (http://moodle.org) is an open source system and is accessible to everyone. For its work it must be installed on a web server on your own computer or from a web host company. There are 32 million users in 205 countries, spread to nearly 80 languages in 45 000 learning communities. A team of developers take care of Moodle in the head office in Australia, distribution is provided by many volunteers around the world.

According to Martin Dougiamas (Creator and Lead Developer of Moodle) the mission of the teacher is not to be a "source of knowledge" the source of knowledge), but rather to shape the culture of the group (course) to realize the relationship of students with their individual needs and activities so that students achieve goals [3].

The focus of Moodle is the ability to give students the best communication tools for collaboration, management and promotion of the educational process, allowing customization, consideration and tailoring to individual needs.

In this connection, I decided to enter experimentally in two of my courses using Moodle platform. So bringing some of the information and communication in the digital environment, I tried to be adequate to the contemporary understanding of communication among the younger generation. The new type of communication is becoming more high tech and is associated with the rapid exchange of large volumes and different types of information.

Upon completion of the courses, I did a survey among students to have feedback and to improve my lectures and seminars. The most articulate result indicated by the students is that they have learned to defend their positions, i.e. they learned critical thinking, argumentation, presentation of arguments and self-estimation. 82% of respondents stated that Moodle-platform has helped them more easily and fully to embrace the course material.

Constructivism in Moodle allows the teacher to choose how much freedom to give to his/her students. In the settings the teacher sets if there will be a password for logging in, what limit for uploaded files, how long to provide presentations that students have the right to redo their tests, etc.

In addition to presentations to each lecture I have put in Moodle resources and links to other sources of information. The most valuable opportunity that provides the platform is forums and discussions.

Here is what one of the students in the survey said: "Each topic was discussed, and then we solved the problems. On almost every topic we had a task where we could develop our thought and speech.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• immediate construction of knowledge • effective learning of material • easy communication with each student • facility for those who cannot regularly attend lectures and seminars • psychological comfort • quick and easy access	• imperfection in the assessment of tests • obstacle for those who are not very good at their work with technologies • not very suitable for older students
Opportunities	Threats
• develop critical thinking • become the basis for new educational systems • future of constructivist learning • overcome the knowledge-division	• students may stop coming to classes

Fig.1. SWOT analysis of the Moodle-training

Conclusions

Implementation and use of advanced information systems in higher education is an imperative today. The trend is the introduction of high technologies in the Bulgarian education, this does not mean the displacement of traditional teaching techniques. Moodle and similar systems help to provoke self-training and preparation of the trainees.

The most important advantages are fast and unlimited time access to information, opportunity for permanent and distance absorption of material taught at the university.

The use of open-access platforms that provide people with different incomes to be educated is one way to bridge the digital and mostly knowledge-divide [4].

New forms of learning that provide digital laboratories reflect the integration of ICT in the educational process and allow for the democratization of education and to successfully implement the constructivist paradigm.

Philosophy and its teaching must adapt to new circumstances related to the dynamics of social processes and the need for new rules of conduct in various areas.

References

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