

Teaching spaces

Suggestions for instructors

Aims

We want to provide the best education for everyone in the Philosophy department. To that end, we want to build actively inclusive learning environments; to help all students feel safe and enabled to participate in discussion.

These are recommendations for instructors (lecturers, PGTAs, etc.) in Philosophy. They are based on consultation with students, PGTAs, and staff.

Teaching philosophy is hard, even at the best of times. Whilst these suggestions are meant to facilitate better teaching and learning, they also highlight some of the burdens on instructors (especially first-time instructors). Inevitably, instructors will not get things right all the time. Moreover, there is no simple algorithm for deciding what is right; there is room for reasonable disagreement on how to run a class; and instructors themselves may (rightly) feel that they are not always sure what it means to 'get things right'.

To that end, these are not rules, but suggestions; you may have different and better ones. And the suggestions are not exhaustive: be sensitive to circumstances.

Setting up a safe space

Make it clear that the teaching space is safe space:

- “Safe space” covers *well-being*: teaching spaces should be spaces where all students are personally comfortable, so that they can think, speak, and learn. Let students know that, if they feel unwell, or uncomfortable with a discussion, they can leave at any point without explanation (ideally, the instructor would discreetly follow up afterwards to ensure the student is fine).
- “Safe space” covers *identity*: remind students that there is no place for misogyny; racism; national, religious or cultural discrimination; sexism; homophobia; transphobia; ablism or agism.
- “Safe space” covers *freedom to speak and disagree*: make it clear that we are free to challenge, argue, and disagree with each other, whilst bearing in mind that our aim is learning and intellectual exploration, not mere altercation. Ask students to reflect on what they can do, to make sure that everyone feels included in a co-operative (rather than competitive) learning environment.

Raising these points at the start of a course will help to ensure that both instructor and students think carefully about their words and actions, and how they affect others.

Note that these suggestions are not about the terminology of “safe space”: you may think that a safe space is better secured without describing it as such.

Pronouns and names

Some people's preferred names aren't on the student register; and people's pronouns can't be read-off from their appearance. You should:

- invite students, perhaps in the first session, to clarify what name they would like to use and to indicate their pronouns when they introduce themselves;
- let students know that they can get in touch, via email, to indicate that you are getting their name wrong, that they would like you to use a different name, or that they wish to be called by different pronouns;
- make yourself aware of the names and pronouns of other instructors on the module.

Mistakes will happen—you may stumble over parsing or pronouncing someone's name, or inadvertently use the wrong pronoun—but you should make clear that this is always in the context of a good-will attempt to get things right.

Choice of topics/examples

Sensitive topics raise profoundly interesting philosophical issues. No particular topics are *forbidden*—we can consider them directly!—but you should give some thought to *how* to discuss them (and *why*).

If you want to assign a sensitive topic in your module:

- explain this in the course description, so that students can decide whether or not to enrol in the course;
- consider providing content warnings for assigned readings;
- consider reminding the students, at the start of a seminar which is likely to involve sensitive topics, that the teaching space is a safe space (see above).

If you want to present a sensitive example, consider whether the sensitive aspect is really necessary:

- *Illustration*: do you need to use a painting of a naked woman to talk about depiction? Maybe so, if you are using the Rokeby Venus to illustrate a point about the use of mirrors. If not, perhaps Cezanne's apples will do?
- *Illustration*: do you need to provide a detailed example of a violent crime which is likely to be upsetting? If your course explores the ethics of punishment, perhaps so. But if you only need to raise an abstract point about moral realism, it might be sufficient for your purposes to raise some generically immoral activity.
- *Illustration*: when offering an example, do you need to mention the protagonists' racial (or gender, sexual, religious...) identity? Of course, if your point is about racial injustice, race might be crucial to the point you want to make. But if the protagonists' identity is irrelevant to your point, needlessly raising it is likely to lead to irrelevant and uncomfortable segues.

Relatedly: some of the philosophers we will want to discuss held immoral views; it's generally better to raise and acknowledge this fact, rather than ignore it.

Nomenclature

Be mindful of nomenclature, but also sensitive to differences in students' mastery of local speech norms (including cases where English is not their first language):

- *Example:* are you using phrases which (implicitly) assume that everyone is either a cis man or a cis woman? If so, consider how you might use language which includes trans and non-binary people.
- *Example:* do you want to say "mixed race", or "queer"? Perhaps so—these terms aren't forbidden—but if you do want to use them, consider contextualizing the term (e.g. you might note that that "queer" is a reclaimed slur, and that you aren't using it as a slur).

As a general guide, look into how members of the group in question prefer to self-refer. Note that this may vary from community to community, which may itself be worth mentioning.

Keeping the space safe

Inevitably, people will sometimes say things which will hurt or offend: a student might belittle someone, be unduly aggressive, mis-gender someone, use offensive terminology, or raise a problematic example.

When issues occur, it's the instructor's job—not the job of the other students—to intervene. But it's not good practice to intervene by shaming a student, or to make them feel self-conscious or anxious about speaking in the future. Indeed, when considering how to intervene, it's important to remember that issues can arise for all sorts of reasons: because a student is not operating in their first language; because they are operating with different cultural norms; because they are neurodivergent and have missed a (neurotypical) cue; etc.

Still, a clear steer on the way to avoid offence is important, e.g.: "I don't think this is relevant to the discussion; let's get back to the argument, and perhaps we should, more carefully, put things thus-and-so." And, if necessary, after the seminar, the instructor might discreetly and kindly follow-up with the student who prompted the intervention, to ensure they understand why an intervention was necessary.