

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY ONLINE?

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Abstract

The article deals with the issue of the appropriateness of online philosophy teaching at the level of secondary schools. The author presents a thesis that online teaching of philosophy as an acceptable substitute for in-person classes should be used only as an exception under special circumstances, e.g. an endemic. Under normal circumstances, online teaching should preferably be used as a valuable supplement to in-person teaching. The thesis is elaborated through an analysis of several fundamental concepts (philosophy, the role of philosophy in the educational process, online teaching). Subsequently, the thesis is also supported by a comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching of philosophy. The disadvantages of online philosophy teaching, as e.g. limited possibility to use dramatization, reading, play, and non-verbal communication will prove to outweigh the advantages.

Keywords: philosophy, teaching philosophy, online teaching, critical thinking

When schools were forced to be closed during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the threat of spreading the disease, the question of online teaching of philosophy on elementary, secondary, and university levels became a critical issue. Under these circumstances, in-person education was suddenly and abruptly changed to online education. This raises the question of how to employ the methods of online education adequately and effectively. Online education is a form of distance education (students and teachers are spatially separated), where the educational content is delivered via the internet.

From a temporal perspective, online education can be divided into synchronous (educational content is delivered and accessed at the same time – e.g. video call, chat, etc.) and asynchronous (educational content is first delivered by the teacher and accessed by the students later – e.g. e-mail assignments; Watts 2016). Synchronous online education can be combined with in-person education in which case it is a hybrid form of education (Raes, Detienne, Windey, Depeape 2020). Online education can be executed using mobile phones, smart phones, laptops, tablets, e-readers, PCs.

This article will focus on the issue of online teaching of philosophy on the level of secondary schools in general, and the issue of the appropriateness of online philosophy teaching in particular. I will defend the thesis that online philosophy teaching should be used only in exceptional circumstances (e.g. an epidemic). Under normal circumstances, online philosophy teaching should

only be used as a supplement to in-person education. In order to argue for this thesis, I will analyze several concepts fundamental for the context of the issue. First, I will analyze the character of philosophy and explain its role in education. Subsequently, I will analyze online education pointing to some of the main advantages and disadvantages of using it in the context of teaching philosophy. The comparison of these advantages and disadvantages will be used to justify the thesis that online teaching of philosophy should be used only as a supplement to in-person classes (hybrid system).

1. What is philosophy?

In order to determine how to best teach philosophy and how to employ online teaching, we have to first determine what philosophy is. Philosophy can be defined in several ways, what is a sign of different views about what philosophy is. One approach focuses on the nature of the questions that philosophy attempts to answer. According to Floridi (2013), we can distinguish between three kinds of questions: those that can be answered by empirical means, those that can be answered by logical-mathematical means, and those that cannot be answered in one of these two ways (or a combination of them) – Floridi calls these “open questions” and claims that philosophical questions are exactly of such kind.

According to Floridi and to Labuda (Floridi 2013; Labuda 2018: 375) philosophy can thus be understood as the answering of open questions through noetic resources possibly constrained by logical and empirical resources. It is a conceptual design that includes the identification of open questions and designing, proposing, and evaluating the relevant answers. Open questions are the not yet answered ones. Philosophy stems from astonishment, asks fundamental questions, and directs activity toward answering them. Philosophical questions differ from the empirical and logical-mathematical questions by virtue of being open. Empirical and logical-mathematical questions are principally closed, i.e. in principle, we know how to answer them “once we have the necessary and sufficient resources to formulate a correct answer” (Floridi 2013: 200). However, this does not mean that we always have the necessary and sufficient sources needed for the formulation of a correct answer. Expanding the empirical and logic-mathematical knowledge expands the availability of further knowledge of these fields. Floridi defines an open question to be a question 1) the answers to which are in principle open to further informed, rational, and honest disagreement; 2) which is fundamental, but not absolute; 3) which is closed under further questioning in the sense that there are ultimate questions whose answers are most influential in terms of a cascade of further question and answers to other related question within that network; 4) that cannot be answered solely by empirical and logical-mathematical sources; but 5) requires also further noetic sources to be answered¹ (Floridi 2013: 215; Labuda 2018: 373). When formulating a question and the relevant answer, one also needs to pay attention to the context and level of abstraction. It is not possible to reduce philosophy to conceptual analysis as some authors have suggested (Wittgenstein 1984: 4.003, 4.0031, 4.112; Carnap 1934: §78; Carnap 1963: 55). By answering practical open questions (e.g. How am I to act?) philosophy attempts to define the place of the issue at hand within the complex of the world and the reaction to some stimuli from

¹ What Michael Dummett calls philosophy’s source of information, what we already know, is according to Floridi a part of other noetic sources (Dummett 2010: 10; Floridi 2013: 211).

the world. In such a way, it attempts to examine a worldview and determine its rationality to determine what the world is and what the relation between an object and the whole of experience is (Muck 1968). In order to determine the proper position of humans in the world, it is necessary to know the world. To teach philosophy is to help the students to answer open questions through noetic resources (i.e. to learn conceptual design). It means to teach them to make use of their abilities (i.e. analytic and critical thinking, interpretation of philosophical text) and competences (i.e. to solve a philosophical problem, to present an argument) for this goal. Doing this, philosophy contributes to the development of their personality.²

2. The role of philosophy in education

The role of education in general and also of philosophy is to contribute to personal development of the students. This contribution can be achieved through four main functions of philosophical education, which are intertwined with one another (Gałkowski/Kaźmierczak 2020: 232):

- 1) The students should learn about the history of philosophy as a part of the cultural heritage and the process of answering the open questions.
- 2) Philosophy should familiarize the students with new aspects of experience and the world. This can help them to challenge some of their ungrounded prejudices that are formed as a result of simplified and simplifying preconceptions of reality.
- 3) It should stimulate critical and creative thinking of the students.
- 4) Philosophy should explain different ways of thought and approaches to issues/problems. It means the different methods used in philosophy, such as conceptual analysis, phenomenological method, existential account, etc.

Aiming at these four tasks, philosophy contributes to the development of students' intellectual abilities that provide them with a basis for thinking and acting later in their lives. Learning about the history of philosophy and its various methods as well as uncovering new aspects of experience and the world facilitates the development of critical and creative thinking that seems to be central for personal development since they make critical evaluation of the motives of action and decision making possible. "It also means that the method of teaching philosophy is at least as important as the content, and even more important considered from a developmental perspective" (Gałkowski/Kaźmierczak 2020: 232). Personal development also includes character formation (Lerner/Fischer/Weinberg 2000: 15). Character can be defined as a dynamic system that includes moral cognition, other related social-emotional capacities and skills, self-regarded capacities for executive control and self-regulation, and discourse skills for responsive engagement and orientation for principled moral change (Nucci 2019). Since character is a dynamic system, it can be formed through education. "Good character education is good education" (Berkowitz 2017: 84). Character formation pertains to thought, feelings, and action. It is a formation in core values recognized in all cultures, that constitute fundamental qualities such as caring/compassion, virtuousness, fairness, responsibility, and respect for oneself and the others that characterize a good

² The explanation will be given in the next chapter.

human being (Lickona 1996: 93; Nast 2020: 12). Lickona and Nast formulated eleven principles for effective character formation that all school employees contribute to (Lickona 1996; Nast 2020).³ Well-formed character contributes to pro-social and responsible behavior. Character formation is facilitated by critical thinking, but not exclusively by that. It also requires further elements supporting the development of volitional abilities. Development of critical thinking is also facilitated by creative writing (Edberg 2018), and by group discussion. Writing philosophical essays teaches the students to organize their thoughts in argumentation scheme (Cunningham 1985). The development of critical thinking proceeds from individual examination of argumentation to a dialogical examination of argumentation at the level of secondary schools (Kuhn 2018). Purposeful training of argumentation also develops the capability for correct argumentation and norms of it (Kuhn, Zillmer, Crowell, Zavala 2013). Argumentation training should prepare for argumentation, the formation of arguments, and their defense. The pragma-dialectical approach to the reconstruction of argumentation, that includes counter-considerations (where pro considerations override the counter considerations although the counter considerations have been taken into account) seems to be a suitable strategy (Juthe 2019)⁴. The students' character formation is facilitated by personal development, particularly by perfection of their abilities and skills. Personal development within the educational context is also dependent on the mode of education (in-person or distance education), on the methods used, as well as on the influence of the student's home environment and culture.

³ Lickona formulates the following 11 principles of effective character formation: 1. Character education promotes ethical core values as the basis of good character. 2) "Character" must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling and behavior. 3) Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life. 4) The school must be a caring community. 5) To develop character, students need opportunities for moral action. 6) Effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respect all learners and helps them succeed. 7) Character education should strive to develop student's intrinsic motivation. 8) The school staff must become a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students. 9) Character education requires moral leadership from both staff and students. 10) The school must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort. 11) Evaluation of character education should assess the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators and extent to which students manifest good character." (Lickona 1996)

Nest proposed these principles in a modified form: "1. Core values are defined, implemented and embedded into school culture. 2. The school defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing. 3. The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to develop character. 4. The school creates a caring community. 5. The school provides students with opportunities for moral action. 6. The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them succeed. 7. The school fosters student's self-motivation. 8. All staff share the responsibility for developing, implementing, and modeling ethical character. 9. The school's character initiative has shared leadership and long-range support for continuous improvement. 10. The school engages families and community as partners in the character initiative. 11. The school assesses its implementation of character education, its culture and climate, and the character growth of students on a regular basis." (Nest 2020)

⁴ Pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation was invented and developed by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (van Eemeren/Grootendorst 1984). They not only pay attention to the logical structure, but also to the pragmatic factors of argumentation, in this they follow J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts. They consider an analysis of a dispute with different opinions. The primary aim of interlocutors of a dispute is to resolve it. The discussants will defend its standpoints in an argumentative discussion. They will achieve the perlocutionary effect. In their book, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst develop guidelines for the analysis of argumentative discussions, making unexpressed premises and rules for a code of conduct for rational discussions explicit.

3. Online education

Online education is the employment of distance method of education using digital technologies (e. g. PCs, tablets, or mobile smartphones) or online-programs. The students can either follow the lesson on their own or in smaller groups. They can also be divided into smaller groups, such as joining rooms on “MS Teams”. The teaching of philosophy should facilitate the students’ personal development, to them help improve their critical and creative thinking. The road to this goal leads through the training of argumentation. This training is significantly facilitated by reading philosophical texts, in which one can uncover the argumentation of the authors. This requires intellectual effort. The question is whether online education makes this task easier, harder, or impossible to achieve. Online education employs digital media that young people also use in their free time. As Gałkowski and Kaźmierczak put it:

The reference point for a young person is no longer a book or a school class, but a TV set, computer, tablet or smartphone. Such devices create, as it were, a natural environment for young people, catering for their intellectual and spiritual development. Young people spend at least several hours a day in front of their computer monitors or looking at the screens of their smartphones. (Gałkowski/Kaźmierczak 2020: 234)

The use of digital media by young people bears the danger of leading to shallow thought, to the efforts to gain short information connected with visual perception (Gałkowski/Kaźmierczak 2020: 235-238). Shallow thought is focused on particular facts, events, and images. Deep thought is abstract. Critical and creative thinking is abstract thinking developed through the examination of reasons for arguments and the support of critical and creative thinking by creative writing. The training of argumentation as a way to critical thinking can take place within discussion groups as well as through online education. The digital medial supported discussion can be different and therefore may lead to different outcomes. Critical thinking can be classified as higher level thought (Geertsen 2003). According to Bloom’s taxonomy, higher level thinking skills consist of analysis, evaluation (assessment of argumentation), and creativity (synthesis of conclusions, arguments). The lower level thinking skills consist of memory, understanding, and application (Bloom 1956; Valentová, Brečka, Tureková 2021: 859).⁵

4. The advantages and disadvantages of online education

Online education has its advantages as well as disadvantages, the importance, and impact of which can be influenced by several factors. Online education using digital technologies can also mediate a discussion leading to critical thinking. One possibility is to organize a discussion on online social networks. It is important to attempt to create a cognitive engagement among the participants, which reflects gained knowledge of higher level (Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2001: 11).⁶ Employment

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, the higher-level thinking and its respective abilities are understood as equivalent with deep thought, and the lower-level thinking and its respective abilities are understood as equivalent with shallow thought.

⁶ The authors propose four phases of the practical examination in online education: 1) triggering event, 2) exploration, 3) integration, and 4) resolution. It is however necessary to keep in mind that these phases are a part of asynchronous online educations, since the technical means of their time were not yet suitable for synchronous distance education

of reciprocal peer tutoring, where students take turns in their roles, used in discussions on online social networks can also lead to an increase of higher level thought (Zulkifli, Halim, Yahaya, Van der Meijden 2020). The move to higher level thinking is influenced by a more frequent examination of previous knowledge. This means that the increase of critical thinking can be achieved by both in-person and online education. Important here is the training in argumentation, which can be executed by both types of education, as well as hybrid education, if it facilitates acquisition of critical thinking skills. Even though many of these studies were conducted on the level of higher education, its conclusions are proportionally applicable also in secondary schools. In order to compare in-person and distance education, it is important to compare their advantages and disadvantages and apply them to the teaching of philosophy in secondary school environment employing synchronous online education.

A.) Advantages of online education in comparison to in-person education in secondary school environment:

- 1) It is the only possible way of education during lockdown caused e.g. by endemic or pandemic diseases.
- 2) Attendance is possible for students from several areas/countries. This is not typical in secondary school context.
- 3) The ability to attend education while working.

Advantages 2) and 3) are mostly applicable to students engaged in distance education on university level, where distance education was first developed.

B.) Disadvantages of online education in comparison to in-person education in secondary school environment:

- 1) Prolonged exposure weakens abstract thought via the primacy of images (Galkowski/Kaźmierczik 2020: 236-238). The same view is also maintained by Cladis, who supports it by his own teaching experience, significant set of literature (Cladis et al. 2020), as well as a study with more than 300 participants undertaken in one college (Dartmouth College 2016).
- 2) Weakening of social contacts (Primack et al. 2017; Galkowski/Kaźmierczik 2020: 236–238), joined with possible negative experiences with social media (e.g. negative health outcomes as increased hypertension, cardiac failure, increased depressions; Primack et al.

(Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2001: 8–13). They also proposed descriptors characterizing the individual phases 1) evocative, i.e. inductive, it is a conceptualization of the problem, 2) inquisitive, i.e. divergent, represents the search for relevant information, 3) tentative, i.e. convergent, represents the construction of a possible solution, 4) committed, i.e. deductive, it is the process of concept assessment, deductive testing of the validity of the solution. To each phase they also proposed an activity to achieve the phase's goal. Phases 3) and 4) represent thinking of higher level (Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2001: 13–16). This method, however, is outdated in its limitation to asynchronous online education. In a modified form, it can also be used in synchronous online education, especially through discussion. This is elaborated in detail by other authors (e.g. Kienstra, Karskens, Imants 2014).

2019; Shensa et al. 2020), that also leads to the weakening of higher level thought. This occurs when the students engage in digital education at home for long periods of time.

- 3) Online education does not allow for a reading connected with play, dramatization, or drawing, nor for joint reading (Hrkút 2021, 36-38).
- 4) The possibility to use non-verbal motivational strategies is also limited when using education on online social networks (Hrkút 2021, 44–47).
- 5) Weakening of emotional and social intelligence, memory, self-management) (Firth et al. 2019, Small et al. 2020).
- 6) Weak influence on character formation (Hignasari, Wijaya 2020).

The disadvantages of online education are more visible in its long-term employment joined with the overuse of images and short texts. This leads to the preference for concrete thinking as opposed to abstract thinking. Another disadvantage consists in the absence of real-life presence, that weakens the students' socialization and character formation. This formation is especially needed in elementary and secondary schools. Since it is almost impossible to mediate character formation through online education, when a child is learning from home, an increased involvement of parents is essential (Hignasari/Wijaya 2020: 228–244). It is similar to a situation when a parent has to regularly leave his/her family for long periods of time due to his/her work. Such regular and prolonged absence from home weakens his/her influence on the character formation of his/her children. At the same time, character formation is one of the goals of philosophy teaching. Mitigation of some of these disadvantages is possible through a preferential usage of discussion groups, be it with tutoring or without. Discussion can be also used for the formation of critical thinking in online or hybrid education of philosophy.

5. Comparison of advantages and disadvantages

During a lockdown, the only possibility to continue education may be to use online education. However, this should, I claim, be done only temporarily since the negative effects of online education are significant and long-lasting. The article analyzed the issue of online teaching of philosophy and addressed the question of the appropriateness of teaching philosophy online. The significant positive effect of online education in secondary schools is the possibility to continue education in the time of lockdown during an epidemic or pandemic. Improvement of students' critical and creative thinking should be one of the most important benefits of philosophy teaching. Other roles of philosophy teaching support this goal that facilitates the formation of students' character. The most significant negative effect of online education is the weakening of abstract thought, that is necessary for the training of critical thinking as one of the important points in philosophy teaching. One of the biggest disadvantages of online education is desocialization that can also contribute to the development of mental disorders. Long-term regular online philosophy teaching also weakens students' emotional and volitive traits that are necessary for the formation of their character and personal development. In addition, online education does not allow for adequate employment of various strategies of in-person philosophy teaching, such as dramatization, drawing, play, non-verbal communication, etc. For these reasons, online teaching of philosophy becomes unfavorable. The disadvantages of online philosophy teaching are too

serious and thus cannot be outweighed by its advantages. I have defended the thesis that online philosophy teaching should be regularly used only in exceptional circumstances (e.g. an epidemic or pandemic). Under normal circumstances, online philosophy teaching should only be used as a supplement to in-person education. In order to argue for this thesis, I have analyzed several concepts (philosophy, the role of philosophy in educational process, online teaching) that are fundamental for the context of the issue. Then I compared the advantages and disadvantages of online philosophy teaching, that justified the thesis. Philosophy should support the personal development of the students. In this context, the training in argumentation leading to the acquisition or deepening of critical thinking (which is an expression of deep or higher-level thinking) proved to be central to philosophy teaching. Online education should therefore only be used when there is no other way to continue education, or as a supplement to in-person education.

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