

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

ALKELINE VAN LENNING

TEACHING TODAY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE¹

Krisis, 2013, Issue 1

www.krisis.eu

Hospital Administrator: And what are you doing this morning?

Obstetrician: It's a birth.

Hospital Administrator: Ah. And what sort of thing is that?

Dr. Spenser: Well, that's where we take a new baby out of a lady's tummy.

Hospital Administrator: Wonderful what we can do nowadays.

– Monthy Pyton and the Meaning of Life (1983)

Universities Today

An academic program, a philosophy program perhaps more so than any other, should ultimately guide students to an educated understanding of the world and to well-informed wisdom. It should train students to develop the skills of contemplation and reflection and thus to arrive at an understanding of the world as profound as their relatively young age allows them to have. It is these skills that enable them to become caring, active global citizens. Philosophy students need to learn *how* to contemplate and to reflect. Of course they have to be intelligent enough to acquire these skills, and they have to be motivated enough to learn them. But above all, they need to be taught by inspiring teachers. These days, however, teachers have to publish or they will perish, and time spent on educating students is often considered time sorely lost for (the higher-status activity of doing) research. In spite of all kinds of statements to the contrary from university boards, research is still valued much higher than teaching in any academic career. This does not detract from the fact that

in the last twenty years more and more attention has been paid to the quality of teaching in academia, resulting in quality control and surveillance programs being put in place virtually everywhere. In 2012, the Dutch government made firm agreements with universities on the performance and output of educational programs. These agreements included the following: increase in students' study success, decrease in the number of drop-outs, decrease in study switches, and increase in students' participation in programs of excellence. Much as one might be inclined to applaud optimizing output figures, it is important to be aware of the challenges involved. Apart from the fact that teaching is not always given sufficient priority, it should not be forgotten that the number of students entering higher education has increased tremendously. It turns out that the percentage of highly educated persons in the Netherlands is eight times higher than it was in the early sixties (2012 Dutch Ministry of Science and Education). If we add to this the present-day budget constraints in education, with quite a bit less money to spend per student than fifty years ago, a decline in educational quality seems almost unavoidable. Perhaps the most conspicuous cutback in terms of quality in the last thirty years has been the reduction of Master's programs to one year instead of two. There is an odd discrepancy here. Reduced funds do not normally generate higher quality. In spite of the seemingly increasing emphasis on quality in education, the translation of this objective in practical terms, i.e. through optimizing output figures (thus effectively redefining it in terms of quantity), in fact camouflages the unavoidable loss of quality and depth inherent in the vast increase in the number of students and the reduced lecturer-student ratios and reduced number of contact hours. It seems that across the board, more and more needs to be done in less and less time. Efficiency rules, but it comes at a price.

Things have not gotten any easier for students either. While it was still quite common for students to take many years to graduate in the sixties and seventies, often living comfortably on a government grant, they now have to finish their studies in a relatively short period of time, and need jobs to cover their expenses. Students have to pass their exams in time, and if they do not do well enough in the first year of their studies, they have to quit their studies altogether. Time is scarcer than it used to be, both for teachers and for students.

Digitalization

These days, we have all kinds of devices at our disposal that help us save time. Since virtually all people in the Western world have access to computers, and more particularly to the Internet, we can look up all kinds of information at an unprecedented speed. Lectures can be viewed at any given time on the Internet. Students have been given more and more opportunities to assess the quality of their education: they can now evaluate courses, the required reading, and the teachers. Through electronic course evaluations, teachers now have immediate access to students' assessments. And there are rankings, rankings everywhere. Rankings of universities, rankings of scientific journals, rankings even of teachers. Universities have to offer high-quality programs, preferably taught by excellent teachers. Results are made public in a competitive environment. Summaries of classic books can be found in a jiffy. Quotations are found in seconds. Facts, figures and graphs, as well as analyses of this kind of information – It is all there, at the press of a button.

Apart from all its obvious blessings (such as quick and easy results) digitalization has also brought along immense mental poverty (Carr 2010). In their evaluations of courses taught at the university, students often express a wish for more in-depth knowledge and more profound insights. Maybe technology has made things a little too easy, not just for students but for all of us. If we want to know something about a great author, all we need to do is surf the net, go to Wikipedia, find a summary of his/her great book, and select a few catchy quotations - cherry-pick our way through the book as it were. And that is really quite enough, we've got the picture, no point in reading the whole book. But at the same time we feel that something essential is missing, and we are aware of that hole. On a physical level, we could compare it to getting to the top of a mountain. It is a totally different experience to climb a mountain, to get tired beyond words, get sweaty and thirsty and then make it through the final few feet, and reach the summit. You are standing on the mountaintop and it is an overwhelming experience; everyone who has done this, knows the feeling. But if you have taken a mountain train or a cable car to the top, or if you are dropped there by a helicopter, it is a totally different experience, incomparably less exciting. You will not feel the same intensity, will not

have the same experience. That is the difference between going through a summary on the Internet and actually reading a book cover to cover, underlining intriguing passages, scribbling things in the margins. Real knowledge, knowledge that stays with you, that becomes part of you, does not come by mountain train or cable car, it comes from climbing. Real knowledge comes only with effort, discipline and time.

Shallowness

In spite of the often-uttered wish of students for in-depth knowledge and profound insights, teachers complain about students' shallowness. Teachers experience students as being easily distracted and credit-oriented rather than as craving knowledge and insight. In class, they seem to be compulsive users of phones and laptops, claiming they are taking notes but half the time teachers are not so sure. They notice that frequently the students' minds are elsewhere. While they claim to be capable of multi-tasking, they nevertheless seem to lack the capacity to concentrate on a complex task from beginning to end.

But teachers too fall prey to the temptations and diversions offered by the Internet and all kinds of electronic gadgets and equipment. Many suffer also from a loss of concentration and focus, and they complain about division of attention and fragmentation of thoughts. Although many of them do not use social media and use their cell-phones only for short conversations and matter-of-fact messages, they nevertheless do engage in a lot of speedy superficial skimming activities on the Internet – browsing, scrolling, scanning texts and spotting keywords. And they are immensely distracted by their email (Carr 2010). No wonder that there is increasing critique on the effect of the Internet and the digitalization of academic life. At the same time, there is a growing nostalgia for old libraries, wooden reading tables, classic titles, and old books, for professors who invite students to their homes and introduce them to books, music, art they may be unfamiliar with, read important texts with them, outside of the regular curriculum of course, and so on and so forth.

We cannot turn back the clock, cannot go back in time. We must not ignore the possibilities the Internet and computers have to offer. The changes are here to stay. But the new cannot just push away the old overnight. It takes time for new developments to become dominant, and usually the old and the new exist side by side for quite some time. Books are still being written and continue to be read; students take notes using pens as well as notebooks. Some teachers use the old-fashioned blackboard together with the digital blackboard. We will have to see what is lost and what is gained in the process. And more importantly: we are going to have to decide what to embrace and what to keep at bay.

Reading and Memorization

The ability to store all kinds of information in computers is of course a gain. But it has also made us value human memory less. There are many differences between the human living memory-function and the artificial dead memory stored in computers. An important quality of the human brain is that it reworks memories. When you store something in your computer, it stays there forever; it will not change or develop. This obviously has its advantages and we would not want it any other way, but the beauty of human remembering is the unique connections we can make. As you develop, you make new connections and you re-interpret that which you remember. This actually is a form of thinking, and it is part of what makes our identities unique (Carr 2010: 192). If we all read the same summaries and use the same catchy quotes, we will miss the unique value of personal selection and new insights that readers, based on their personal experiences, knowledge and susceptibility, have gained from books. We will miss the fruits of other people's reflections on the work of important thinkers.

Philosophy students should be encouraged to prolong their engagement with a single argument. They need to be able to think long and hard. To develop this mental discipline is not an easy thing to do. Deep thinking requires a calm and attentive mind. Quiet solitary research is a prerequisite for intellectual achievement. The same state of mind is required for intense reading and arriving at a profound understanding of complex

books. If students have learnt how to become deeply engaged intellectually, they will have discovered a source of great joy: reading a book and taking it in like a precious substance, the total immersion in another world, in the ideas of the author. Reading calmly and attentively is a very important academic skill. And it is a skill that has to be trained, because the students' first impulse often is to try to avoid this activity, many others being considered much more alluring. Maybe this is partly because their mental state is influenced by the fragmentation typical of many digital texts, with hyperlinks that further disrupt one's concentration. But it also is natural for humans to avoid effort, physically as well as mentally. Nicholas Carr explained that brain training can be compared to muscle training, especially in the case of memorization (Carr 2010). One has to repeat exercises in order to obtain results. The brain and the body both need exercise, resistance and effort. Memorization is an important exercise; it is gymnastics for the brain.

When academics are engaged in the process of thinking they are recalling the contents of books and they make connections with other texts and insights and with their personal experiences. Academics make associations with knowledge already established in their memory. To be able to make such connections one has to store important information about books in the brain. The key to remembering something later is attentiveness, mental concentration, intense intellectual engagement; the sharper the attention, the better the memory. And as Carr rightly observes: 'repetition encourages consolidation' (Carr 2010: 184). Memorization is often referred to rather irreverently as '*cramming*', but the resulting store of valuable information can be described quite justly in rather more attractive terms as "knowing something by heart". If students are trained to learn things by heart, they are building their inner repertoire of knowledge and understanding and in the process are equipped to reflect on the human condition, in an informed and disciplined way.

Teaching and the Meaning of Life

Can the meaning of life be taught at school? Originally, American institutions actually started out with the intention of instructing students in the

meaning of life. Steiner's assessment of the radical change in the late nineteenth century when this objective was abandoned was that it had brought about emptiness (Steiner 2013). At the end of the nineteenth century, the New Knowledge emerged: the importance of disciplines on any topic, characterized by increasingly narrow boundaries. The result has brought us highly specialized knowledge as well as tunnel vision. This ethics of specialization moved the question of the meaning of life from the centre of academia to the margins, and eventually made it disappear altogether. Today it seems to have been relegated to the private sphere, turned into a private question, one that we have actually come to feel as being too personal to be dealt with at universities; the proper instructors to help us answer this question, we now feel, are our parents and friends, not the academy (Kronman 2007). In the process of emancipation of Western universities, away from their theological origins, so Steiner observes, the legitimating force of textual precedents and reference is lost. The authority of tradition is gone. Although there are very valid reasons not to return to the authority of the church in universities, the process nevertheless has left a disabling void (Steiner 2013: 33).

Maybe we have to formulate the central question differently, and instead ask: what is a good life? Or perhaps we should ask: what is it we ought to care about? But here a new problem emerges: as Søren Kierkegaard pointed out: 'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward'. Fortunately there is a solution to this problem: books! Many well-educated ancestors committed to patient paper their wise and well-informed reflections on their experiences. We can still read these authors and compare how they deal with the eternal questions of the meaning of life and what it is that constitutes a good life. If one reads a lot, and some of us do, one will find that reading (authors) can be like collecting art or music: we don't have to choose between one author and another, just as we do not have to choose between Rembrandt and Klimt, or between Bach and Mahler. Gradually one begins to perceive the authors as friends. This is a beautiful thing, although there is a danger that your flesh-and-blood friends become a distraction...

The question of the meaning of life is so vast that we cannot look at it directly. It has to be approached indirectly. As Kronman puts it: 'the mean-

ing of life is not a real question, the question is too broad and too indefinite; it's a mirage' (Kronman 2007). But education can provide us with the resources to think about the question. We can only hope that we will come up with parts of an answer and with many interesting new questions. Maybe this hope is why some of us cannot stop reading and studying. And as Havel said: 'Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out'.

Alkeline van Lenning is ad. Professor Academic Teaching in Social Sciences and Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Tilburg University. She specialized in theories on gender.

References

Carr, N. (2010) *The Shallows. What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York, London: Norton & Company.

Kronman, A.T. (2007) *On Education's End. Why our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Steiner, G. (2013) *Universitas?* Tilburg: Nexus Instituut.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.

¹ The author would like to thank Hans Verhulst for his valuable editorial remarks and language corrections.