

Mary Loader: Welcome to Course Stories. Produced by the instructional design and new media team of Ed Plus at Arizona State University. In this podcast, we tell an array of Course Design stories alongside other ASU online designers and faculty. On today's Course Story.

Speaker 2: So on the home page of this course, you go into a short narrative about the connection between philosophy and happiness. So what do you mean by this?

Jeffrey Watson: Sure.

Speaker 2: Why do you bring this up right on the very first page?

Jeffrey Watson: Yeah. The way I see it, there are two basic motivations. It's usually a combination of the two that drive you to sign up for a course. And one is, something as 'a means towards happiness', and the other is that it's 'a part of happiness'. So what I mean by 'a means towards happiness' is that the thing itself might be difficult. It might not be fun, it might not be the thing you most enjoy, but you know that when you've done that, you're going to have some ability or some credential or some prerequisite for the ability and the credential. You're going to have something that you can do something with. And then a second motivation, I say a part of happiness is that a part of living a good life, a part of a happy life that I say a good life, I mean a happy life. A life that is worth living is engaging in this thing.

Mary Loader: Hi, I'm Mary Loader, an Instructional Designer from ASU Online.

Ricardo Leon: I'm Ricardo Leon. I'm a media specialist at the same place. Yeah,

Mary Loader: Yeah, we work together.

Ricardo Leon: Let's get on with the show.

Mary Loader: Okay.

Ricardo Leon: That sound means we're recording.

Mary Loader: Oh, good. I love podcasting. Well, I'm excited today. We're always excited at the beginning of our podcast. I've realized after listening to them, that we talk about how excited we are. We need a new adjective

Ricardo Leon: You don't feel excited?

Mary Loader: I mean, I am excited.

Ricardo Leon: What are you excited about, Mary?

Mary Loader: Well, I'm excited about this episode again. I feel like we could just basically take that from the last episodes. I

Ricardo Leon: I hear you. I hear you on that. Well, this one's different. It's the philosophy special, right?

Mary Loader: It's also different because we have special guests with us for the interim conversation. Hello Special guest.

Deanna Soth: Hello.

Ricardo Leon: Oh, you want to start from this?

Mary Loader: I mean, I don't know what we're doing. And this is what we do every time. We have no idea what we're doing.

Ricardo Leon: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We just kind of-

Mary Loader: Before, Ricardo had to sort through it.

Ricardo Leon: We find it.

Mary Loader: He finds it.

Ricardo Leon: Hey Mary.

Mary Loader: Hey Ricardo.

Ricardo Leon: How's it going?

Mary Loader: I'm doing well. How are you?

Ricardo Leon: I'm doing really good. I'm-

Mary Loader: Different adjectives than excited.

Ricardo Leon: Different adjectives than excited.

Mary Loader: Insert here.

Ricardo Leon: All right, let's start again.

Mary Loader: You ready?

Ricardo Leon: Yeah.

Mary Loader: Start again since I talked over you,

Ricardo Leon: We're going to have mugs and stuff that say 'Hey Mary' because that's how I start.

Mary Loader: 'I'm Excited' will be on the other side. On the bottom of the cup it'll say, 'Insert Other Adjective Than Excited'. A really quick synonym for...

Deanna Soth: Just pull up the Pan Lexicon. Pan Lexicon

Ricardo Leon: Oh, that'll be a fun bit if we just keep using words that are not excited.

Deanna Soth: Enthusiastic, impassioned, exuberant, delirious, spirited. I am so spirited.

Mary Loader: I am delighted.

Ricardo Leon: Oh, that's nice. You ready? Hey Mary.

Mary Loader: Hey Ricardo.

Ricardo Leon: How's it going today?

Mary Loader: It's going really well. How are you?

Ricardo Leon: I'm good. I'm good. I'm really thrilled to be... That was the one you were going to use?

Deanna Soth: Oh my God. It was literally the one I'm looking at. It's like you're doing a mind reading trick.

Ricardo Leon: Well, I just picked the first one on Google.

Deanna Soth: No, I picked almost the last one at the bottom too, dude.

Mary Loader: Okay. We're in sync anyway. I'm titillated

Ricardo Leon: Listeners, we're trying to find other words than excited. We feel like we've been saying excited.

Mary Loader: We want to peak your interests, but if we keep using excited, you guys are going to think it's the same episode each time.

Ricardo Leon: Yeah. Yeah. Because I mean, we are exhilarated. I for one am elevated and electrified.

Mary Loader: I'm favorably impressed.

Ricardo Leon: Oh, favorably impressed. Well, one of the things that has enlivened me the most is that we have a very, very good conversation coming up for you here, listeners. And also we have, in studio with us for the intro here and throughout the episode, we have a special guest. Deanna, would you like to introduce yourself?

Deanna Soth: Yes. Hello.

Mary Loader: Hi.

Deanna Soth: I'm Deanna Soth, Assistant Director of Instructional Design at ASU online Ed Plus, and today we are listening to a really interesting conversation between Christine Moore on my team at ASU Online and Jeff Watson in the philosophy department at ASU. Yeah, I've worked with Jeff for quite a few years in the philosophy department, and I'm really excited to have everyone listen to this conversation because it's very interesting. And for folks listening who are instructors, I would invite you to listen for Jeff to talk about a few different things. So, he's going to be talking about his goals for his course and why folks should take philosophy classes in general.

And the way he talks about it can be translated to really any discipline. So whoever's listening out there who's teaching any sort of course, Jeff has a lot of great things to say about it. And so he's talking about how he grades fairly, especially as an ethics teacher. I think that's just very interesting. And how he's grading on, not on the positions that his students are taking, but how they're coming to those conclusions. So I'm very excited too for us to hear that conversation today.

Mary Loader: Me too. Yeah.

Ricardo Leon: We were here that day, and you can just tell that Jeff gives off this humanist vibe that is really kind of, I can imagine being a student in that class feeling very secure, knowing that your efforts will be worth it and that it's not a right or wrong situation.

Deanna Soth: He's a nice man. So that's one thing and then he's also very fair, and he spends so much time with his online students. I'm not sure that came through necessarily in the conversation, but he spends so much time with his students, it's so great. So I've loved working with him over the past few years.

Ricardo Leon: Very dedicated teacher.

Mary Loader: Jeff did mention that he has intentionally designed his online courses to allow him the time and space to be so involved. And I think working with people like you and Christine and other people on our team, that intentional approach to design can create that for anybody. So just thinking about how you can automate the places that you can automate so that you can really intentionally

engage in the places that matter and I think Jeff has really figured out a good balance around that.

Deanna Soth: Definitely. And I think it takes time. So he's been teaching for a long time, as you'll hear, but he does an excellent job of creating a sense of community in his courses, which is the one element that we're always looking for in an online class is like, am I going to be teaching myself or is this going to be actually a learning community? And he does a really good job facilitating that, and he gets into the details in this episode.

Ricardo Leon: That's great. That's great. So are we ready to go for it?

Mary Loader: Yeah.

Ricardo Leon: How do you feel about it?

Mary Loader: Listen. Let's do it.

Ricardo Leon: What's your adjective, Deanna?

Mary Loader: Are you keen on this?

Deanna Soth: I'm very keen and delighted and thrilled and all of the words.

Ricardo Leon: All right. Let's do it.

Speaker 2: All right. Hello, everyone. Today we're telling the Course Story for PHI 3 3 5, The History of Ethics with the instructor and course developer, Jeffrey Watson. Hi, Jeff. Thanks for joining us today.

Jeffrey Watson: Hi. Yeah, thanks for having me.

Speaker 2: All right, Let's start from the beginning. If you could tell us just a little bit about this course. How long have you offered this particular course?

Jeffrey Watson: Well, sure. So I've been teaching this class for about seven years now. It started on campus and I mostly taught it as an on campus course and then about two years ago, I developed it into an online class.

Speaker 2: Okay. All right. So teaching it for quite a while. What is it that excites you about this particular course?

Jeffrey Watson: I think History of Ethics is a fun way to look at ethics a little differently. When you're studying ethics, one way to go at it is to look at different ethical theories as kind of competing with each other. And so trying to show that their theory is the right theory or this theory is the right theory and different pros and cons of each theory and that's a useful way to go at it.

But what I like about History of Ethics is that instead of a back and forth debate, it's more of a progressing conversation so we get to see how certain ideas developed early on, and then there's a response in the conversation to what came before and so you can kind of watch a gradual progression of ideas and see how they happened in time and what they were responding to and who was responding to them. And I find that a lot more interesting because instead of this oppositional debate, it's a little more like ideas building on each other or correcting mistakes that came before.

Speaker 2: Sure. And when you talk about those ideas that build on each other, what kind of learning objectives are there for the course?

Jeffrey Watson: Sure. So one of the goals is that students would be able to describe ethics as an ongoing conversation. So understanding it not just as a set of points of views. It's second learning objective is obviously to know what deontology is and know what utilitarianism is, and kind of understand these big ideas. What's virtue ethics? What are the underlying assumptions of virtue ethics? But also to be able to describe that as an ongoing conversation. So one view responding to the next and be able to lay out that story, not just as an argument, but that's also a third learning objective.

I want students in all of my classes to be able to give a good argument for a view, defend the argument against objections, foresee objections, respond to things that someone might say, give the best defense they can and that's, in all my philosophy courses, a goal. But in this class, it's not just that, it's also to kind of capture the history of the story that puts it all together.

Speaker 2: And some of that history starts a long time ago with authors like Plato and Socrates.

Jeffrey Watson: Aristotle.

Speaker 2: Aristotle.

Jeffrey Watson: Yeah. Socrates, of course, very beginning before Plato. And so we kind of start off there with the Greeks. We don't do a lot of pre socratics or pre Socrates, but we start out with the Greeks. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle. We spend a lot of time on Aristotle because he has a lot to say that matters in the future and then we look at the Stoics, the early Stoics and some of their views, which are still influential to many people, and then run through history really quickly through the Middle Ages but we touch some things along the way into the early enlightenment era. And then you get people like David Hume and of course, Emmanuel Kant at the end of that era. And then up until the 1800s and today, so...

Speaker 2: Do you have a lot of students that ask questions about connecting the History of Ethics to today's world or applying theories from the course?

Jeffrey Watson: Well, I mean, one thing that's very useful about seeing the history and the whole history, so the enlightenment era, all the stuff that comes before it and all the ideas that come after it also, is that when you start to think about debates today, you can see them not just as, "They say this is right, and they say this is not right," or "They say this is wrong and they say this isn't wrong," but instead in terms of... Well, they're operating out of a view that is Kant's view, or they're operating out of a utilitarian view, or this is really a Neo-Aristotelian view, right?

Speaker 2: That's a good word. Neo-Aristotelian.

Jeffrey Watson: Aristotle part two. They're working out of a Thomistic view from Thomas Aquinas or they're working out of a Platonic view. So you can kind of re-understand debates that are happening today, not as two people shouting at each other, giving all the reasons on a list, but instead understanding it as well. People are operating at a very different ethical frameworks and we can appreciate how those rows and then what the criticisms were at the time and so we can understand some of those debates now a little more clearly. I can't say that that answers the debates, but it gives us some understanding and maybe some better understanding of how other people think.

Speaker 2: And you actually give students a forum to express that. You have something in your course called the Muddiest Point. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

Jeffrey Watson: Sure. So one thing in the transition from an on campus class to an online class that I needed to think about was how to have the kind of instructor-student conversations that I was used to having in the classroom that are fairly spontaneous, that get into doubts and uncertainty students have or maybe attempts they want to make to apply something and have me spend some time in class, actually responding, not just in a offhand way, like see page 72, but like a sincere response.

And so I wanted to have an online forum where I could do something like that, but obviously not synchronous at different times. And so I would look to something like a community forum or a Muddies Point forum for that kind of conversation. But what I found is the best way to get students to actually engage in that was to put a due date on it. And so I offer one extra credit point, which is not going to make anyone's grade, but as a way of getting that into their attention, it shows up on the dashboard, they can kind of see it, they know to log in and so that invites them to post very openly whatever points of confusion or concern or curiosity. And very often it's just curiosity and that's the best thing. And that gives me a chance to give a response, often to a question I've not thought about before or given enough thought to before.

Deanna Soth: Okay. So Jeff mentioned the Muddiest Point strategy.

Mary Loader: Love the strategy.

Deanna Soth: Yes so-

Ricardo Leon: I don't know what that is at all.

Deanna Soth: So it's a clarifying activity for students to really express what they're confused about in the content for that week or that module. It's a very commonly used strategy in a very general sense. It's like, "Okay, what are you most muddy on this week?" But the way that Jeff uses it specifically is very interesting.

Ricardo Leon: Muddy meaning?

Mary Loader: Unclear.

Deanna Soth: Unclear.

Ricardo Leon: Unclear.

Deanna Soth: Right.

Ricardo Leon: Oh, right, like water versus mud.

Mary Loader: Yeah, like sludge. Yep.

Ricardo Leon: I gotcha.

Mary Loader: Cognitive sludge.

Ricardo Leon: That's the name of my band. Thank you.

Deanna Soth: Oh my gosh.

Ricardo Leon: The new one.

Deanna Soth: But it's a good strategy to really understand what your students are not understanding about the content and you can either clarify on the spot any specific questions, or you can really adjust your course content based on what your students are giving real time feedback about what's confusing. You can potentially make changes in your course depending on their responses. So it's just a way for you to check, engage where your students are. It's a really important kind of

Mary Loader: Refinement activity.

Deanna Soth: Refinement and intervention.

Mary Loader: Yeah. Also, I think it's really helpful for students to see other students be vulnerable and express that they're struggling because they're probably not alone. And it's nice for another student to go, "Oh, okay, it's not just me." And then to have an ongoing conversation to help everybody find the solution together. I just love the Muddiest Point activity when it's used properly like in Jeff's class, it's such a dynamic way to get the class to interact and to really help refine the experience for everybody.

Deanna Soth: There's different ways you could do it too. You could use a discussion forum like Jeff does, and that's helpful for, like you said, for students to see each other. If you'd rather it be more anonymous, you can do a Google form or something like that to get students' feedback. So there's different ways you can go about it.

Ricardo Leon: And what's the frequency that this happens?

Deanna Soth: I'd recommend weekly. You can do mid-semester check-in as well, if that's appropriate. It probably depends on the pace of the course.

Ricardo Leon: And the content of the course. I'm sure if it's... More complex ideas would require more check-ins with those muddy points.

Deanna Soth: And again, it goes back to that learning community where maybe students can help each other and it's not just only instructor facing, but students can also help clarify for each other.

Mary Loader: I love that. It really helps adults put things into their own experience and perspective and feel like a part of something instead of just a passive experience. That's great.

Ricardo Leon: All right. Now some hits from Cognitive Sludge.

Speaker 2: So give us an example. What's been your favorite Muddiest Point?

Jeffrey Watson: I don't know. Favorite? It's hard to find an exact one, but I guess an example would be something like... Here's an objection to a claim. So Kant says, we shouldn't do anything unless it's a universal law that could be applied in all cases and at all times, right? Well, what if I'm in a parking garage and someone needs help starting their car and the person I help start their car turns out to be on their way to do something awful? Should I have helped them start their car? Well, it seems like most of the time, that's a good rule. That's a good general rule. Help people out. If I have the jumper cables in my car, I can attach them. Oh, I'm okay doing that. I can do that. I have time. If you have time and you have the ability to help somebody out, you should help them out.

That seems like a good rule but then can I apply that universally? Or if I'm helping out somebody who has terrible goals at the end, well, of course, the way that question is posed in response, it's kind of a utilitarian question or a

question at least about consequentialism. It's about the consequences of your actions. In this case, unforeseen consequences. You don't know what the person's going to do when you help them out with their car. Are they going to go rob a bank? I don't know. The Kantian response is, "Well, you should think about ethical questions without consideration of the consequences." And so clarifying that point in Kant's is a way of getting clear on what the view is, but also getting clear on what else might be driving some of our intuitions. That we should be concerned about what people are after or what their goals are. That sometimes general rules like that can be tricky.

Speaker 2: And so did the students engage with each other on those muddiest points and give their own philosophical input?

Jeffrey Watson: I have other forms where the students engage a lot with each other. So in the Muddiest Points, sometimes they do, very often it's to me with other students kind of watching in, but we have discussion boards in the class also where they engage with each other. And usually I have prompts for that. So an example is, think about a role, a particular role that someone plays, so like cashier at a store or driver of a car, taxi driver. What are the virtues and vices of that role? That is, what accords well with someone's function in that role, what accords badly with the function of that role? And so that's a kind of plied question, but then students can jump on each other and debate that. Or I have one with respect to Kantian ethics.

It's sort of, look at the UN Charter of Human Rights. For each of those things there, pick one and give me an argument for that on the basis of Kant's, kind of universal style of ethics and it's interestingly, a lot of them, you can make that kind of argument for. So on that forum, students tend to engage a lot more with each other. But the muddiest point is almost a little more instructor student. It's sort of like raising your hand in class and saying, "Hold on, I have a question." And there's a benefit to everybody in hearing that conversation, in having the question raised, which is part of why I offer extra credit and it's valuable to the class but sometimes it's just that particular person's very particular questions.

Speaker 2: Do you know what I did between 10 and 12:30 this morning? I read the UN Charter for Human Rights. Really

Jeffrey Watson: Really? Seriously?

Speaker 2: Working with a course, a political science course on human rights.

Jeffrey Watson: Oh, really?

Speaker 2: Yep.

Jeffrey Watson: Okay. Yeah.

Speaker 2: So we're trying to find a way to work activities throughout the course, like maybe one activity in every module saying, kind of dissect this section, this article of the charter, and make assumptions, questions, evaluations, things like that. So that's not my subject matter expertise to say the least.

Jeffrey Watson: But you read it. Yeah, so-

Speaker 2: I read over it.

Jeffrey Watson: Over it. Okay. Okay. Well, a lot of those things are very Kantian.

Deanna Soth: So let's talk about Yellowdig.

Mary Loader: Ooh, I love Yellow Dig. We all know I love Yellowdig.

Deanna Soth: Yes, I do too. So Jeff mentioned that he uses Yellowdig for

Mary Loader: All of his discussions, I thought. Oh no, he has two different kinds. He does one, that's the muddiest point, and I think he uses it for that. And then just random interactions. But then he has intentional discussions too, as he mentioned.

Deanna Soth: So Yellowdig is a participation and engagement tool that's really gamified for students. I really like it. It's very much like a social media sort of platform where students really gain points based on how engaged they are in it and how engaged the rest of their fellow classmates are with their posts. So it's less of an assessment tool, more of an engagement tool.

Mary Loader: Absolutely. And the big benefit, auto-graded. Love that part.

Ricardo Leon: Wow. Yellowdig system will quantify their interaction and give a grade based on that?

Mary Loader: Exactly. Word count is how they do it now, but I know on the roadmap they have other interactions that are going to be putting points on the board. So right now, they have emojis too. Or if someone responds to your comment with a word count, you can get some points as well and so can they. So there's a lot of ways to earn points and students are fully informed on how that works and so it's really up to them on how they earn the points throughout the entire semester.

Ricardo Leon: Cool.

Deanna Soth: That's all I had to say about that.

Ricardo Leon: Thanks Forrest.

Deanna Soth: I do want to say though, Jeff is the kind of faculty member I would really love to get a beer with and just talk about his class because I felt like this conversation could have gone on for hours and I would've been totally riveted.

Ricardo Leon: And listeners, this conversation did go on longer than you're hearing, because some of that went on the cutting room floor. Maybe we'll release that later as a bonus content or something.

Deanna Soth: So that's a thing with studying philosophy that I actually wanted to talk about because... So we like to philosophize with our friends in the pub right? And that's-

Mary Loader: Totally.

Deanna Soth: But it's only interesting until it's not, right? But then as a philosophy student, you're actually seeing those concepts all the way through, which is actually very hard. So being classically trained in philosophy actually requires a lot of work that it's more than just having interesting conversations.

There's a lot to it. So the philosophy students at ASU online are awesome and they're very hard workers. And I think there's some sort of element to being a philosophy student that you're just kind of there to... You want to learn, so you're invested already. And so it's just a matter of seeing that through all the way through the structures of being classically trained.

Mary Loader: I'd say that's a good thing, because it sounds like in the first few assignments, he does is attack your arguments, which is really good practice for becoming good at arguments but if you're not ready for it, that can feel like a hazing experiment then.

Deanna Soth: And it's-

Ricardo Leon: Absolutely.

Deanna Soth: You could be... Your major could be really... You could be majoring in anything and being able to persuade or engage in argument is always going to be helpful. So I would encourage students of any major to take one of Jeff's classes and really learn at least some basic structures of argument.

Mary Loader: Agreed. And I also loved that his perspective was, "When you learn the theories, when you learn the background of where people's thought processes come from, you're better able to accept them." Maybe you don't agree with them, but you understand where they're coming from. And just having that in general in our society, I think is such a powerful character trait to have that you can see someone else's side and still hold true to what you believe, but still value them and their perspective and their experience.

Deanna Soth: What I want to know is why isn't philosophy taught in high school?

Mary Loader: Right?

Ricardo Leon: I disagree with everything you guys have said.

I'm just practicing my argument skills. Is that good?

Mary Loader: I mean-

Ricardo Leon: I disagree.

Mary Loader: Let's ask Jeff.

Speaker 2: Okay. So I have a question about the type of conversations that you're asking students to have because the history of philosophy isn't something that maybe people internalize very easily or they just kind of watch the lecture and hope they get it, right? So you have the Muddiest Point conversations, you have the Yellowdig conversations about things that are happening kind of in our everyday lives, but then you also tell the students not to discuss so much in the class, but to go out and discuss it with other people and then come back and share what they learned. So tell us a little bit about that.

Jeffrey Watson: Yeah, so I mean another part of this process of thinking through how to turn a on campus class that was a very discussion oriented class on campus to an online class that's going to have that component was, I wanted the students to have informal conversations that are not graded for quality. I expressed this correctly and I brought in the right points and he looked at it and he thought it was good. I made a good argument, not necessarily even conversations with peers, but just trying to explain the view, the act of trying to explain something you read to somebody else, or even explain one point in something you read to somebody else teaches you that point.

The process of trying to explain something, you learn something. And so the thought I had, and the assignment I ended up with was, I assigned them since it's an online course and they're not all going to be awake at the same time, I mean I have students all over the globe, is to find someone else in their life, someone they live with, someone they work with, somebody they are willing to have a phone conversation with, some random person in an internet chat room if that's what they do, whoever they feel comfortable talking to and try to explain something from that particular session, the video and the readings that they read at some point, to the other person and kind of engage with the conversation about that.

And then write up a summary for the class. And so they post this kind of very short summary of the conversation they had with someone else, which is nice in a couple ways. It means that when you're posting this summary, you're not

necessarily saying, "Here's my view," you're saying, "Here's the view of someone else I talked to," which sometimes can bring views into the class that wouldn't get expressed otherwise.

It's also a chance to not have to get everything right but still process the idea. So in the process of trying to explain this view, I came up with this idea, what do you guys think about this analogy? I don't think it's really like a car, but okay. Most of all it just kind of engages them outside of the little limits of the box in the course itself so that it's not limited to, "Oh, I log in, I do my philosophy work, and then I'm done." I think especially with philosophy in general, and especially this class, it's something that's really best if you spend a lot of time thinking about it. Some of the work in the class is not reading, it's not watching, it's not answering quiz questions, it's folding your laundry and I'm thinking about ethics. And so one way to make someone do that is to kind of pull it outside of the little limits of canvas and the online forums and just get someone to converse with somebody else.

And I would guess about 95% of students, from the responses I read, seemed to take pretty well to it. So they found people in their life who were willing to put up with them talking about ethics for a little while. And the process of trying to explain some of these things to someone who's not taking the class and not a specialist, really forces you to get to the kind of core of the idea and get very clear on the idea because the other person's not in the class going, "Oh yeah, yeah, I know that too." So that was the goal of the assignment and it worked out well. There's some challenges that...

I planned this course before Covid hit, and then I first taught it in the fall of 2020. And so there were students who were like, "I'm isolated at home and I do not see anyone else." But in a way, this encouraged them to call someone or text someone or interact with someone in some way. Video call or something outside of the limits of the class. And I had a couple students who volunteered to do an online Zoom chat as a group. And so some of them did a group chat with each other to have that component. But that was definitely different than my initial plan for the course when I was thinking of teaching it. But I think it worked out pretty well.

Speaker 2: Do you see any trends or patterns? Who do the students typically seek out? Because I know I would go to maybe my parents for one philosophical conversation, I might go to some friends for another. Who are the students going to talk to about philosophy? The history of philosophy.

Jeffrey Watson: A lot of it is family members. People they feel comfortable having an informal conversation with. I don't know to what extent they pick and choose which family member for which topic, but that would make sense that sometimes a certain person's going to take well to a certain question and someone's not going to want to talk about it.

But I've also seen people talking to coworkers or things like that. They're working at Starbucks and it's a slow time and you have a chance to have a five minute conversation about something you read. In a way, it kind of engages you in being willing to have conversations with people that are about serious things without needing, I mean, I guess it's your excuse. I mean, sometimes it's hard to have those kinds of conversations in informal environments without everyone getting very tense and so a good excuse to have those kinds of conversations.

Speaker 2: You mentioned something earlier about trying to eliminate the worry about expressing something correctly. And so I was wondering about how you select the questions that you pose students in the course. Because if you're starting with Plato, but you want to have contemporary conversations, how do you select the questions that you pose in those different forums?

Jeffrey Watson: Well, I mean part of it is seeing it as progressing towards more and more sophisticated writing. So your initial encounter with Plato is going to be something where you're trying to relate it to what's going on now but we are progressing towards an essay at the end of the unit and you have to explain Plato's argument and kind of the point of view. So I just want to be clear, I have multiple types of writing and the types that are neither incorrect or correct or cut out at the beginning, progressing towards things where there are correct and incorrect answers. But trying to think of ways to apply an ancient philosopher today is not always as hard as it might seem. Number one, a lot of those ideas are part of the cultural context if someone's in kind of the dominant culture around us. They've found their ways there, you just don't realize until someone points them out.

And a lot of the concepts are things that can be applied a little outside of philosophy. You take a couple steps away, but the underlying idea still works. So what is it that ties together all of the things that are good in some way, right? What's the thing that's in common between a good phone and a good computer and a good night's sleep and a good car, right?

What do they have in common? Was this property for the good quote unquote, right? Well, that question seems just as relevant with the modern examples. I gave cell phones, computers, cars, as it does to Plato and Aristotle, even though they don't have cell phones and computers and cars. Because it's the same kind of underlying question about what is the good, what is that property that causes us to evaluate things?

Speaker 2: Kind of that human element that transcends time and technology and all of that.

Jeffrey Watson: So the examples may be more contemporary sometimes and trying to apply them that way instead of what makes for a good cookery or something. What makes for a good blacksmith? Well, it's harder to relate to that, but it's the same underlying concept. And so it's surprisingly easy to transfer over those things.

- Ricardo Leon: So you have a philosophy background, it sounds like?
- Deanna Soth: I've taken philosophy classes and I'd rather philosophize in the pub than write papers on Kant cause it's interesting until it's not, but then you still have to write the paper, so.
- Mary Loader: Yeah.
- Deanna Soth: You know.
- Mary Loader: You got to really want to be there. But-
- Ricardo Leon: Some people can do it and some people can't.
- Deanna Soth: Oh, Kant jokes. You're on a roll today, Ricardo. I love it.
- Speaker 2: So how do you grade all of these different perspectives and positions on ethical behavior and ideas and philosophies?
- Jeffrey Watson: Yeah, I would never say I grade the position. So students can take any position they want. I disagree with 95% of everything my students write and that's great. And I'm never grading the position or the view. And I want there to be a feeling of openness about expressing views. In those early writing assignments, it's really just completion. Did you actually have a conversation with someone or imagine really well a conversation with someone and describe it, right?
- Speaker 2: Maybe getting some of that practice in.
- Jeffrey Watson: Getting some of that practice in. As they build up to a more formal discussion boards, I have those, it's, "Did you meet what the prompt asked? Did you cite sources? And did you cite sources that were the ones you were supposed to read?" Very straightforward. Then we build into more serious essays and then what I start to look for is more the ability to engage with an argument. Can you express the argument for what you read? So not just tell me, "Here's Plato's position," you copy from the slides and rephrase it. Thank you but can you make it clear to your reader what made that view rational? What made that reasonable? What was the thinking behind that view? It's one thing to say someone thought something was true and another thing to understand it well enough that you could almost try to persuade someone that, that person's view is true.
- And then when you're giving your own view, because I encourage students even on the more serious assignments at the end, to defend an argument for their own view. It's how well is that argument structured and put together? Did it leave any gaps? Does it jump to conclusions? Is it engaged in circular reasoning where you're kind of relying on your assumptions in the process of making your case? And then ultimately, how well did you foresee and respond to objections?

Did you think of ways that someone could disagree with you? Did you make your opponent out to be what we call a 'Straw Man'? No one really holds the view you're attributing to them the way you put it. It's too easy to disagree with. How well did you respond to those? Or at least have a response. Even if that response is a very honest, I don't actually know how I would respond to this objection because it's a really good objection, which is much better than a fake response. A response that's, "This objection is just completely wrong, obviously, period."

Well, that's not very helpful. So that process of engaging with an argument is ultimately the skill that most philosophy classes are aiming at is, can you respond to a point of view you may or may not agree with, develop your own point of view, give some reasons for it, give some reasons against it, weigh the reasons, explain the weighing of the reasons. You might think of it as serving as the judge in a trial and you're writing the verdict at the end, but you want your essay at the end to kind of be like that verdict.

I've considered both sides. I've considered this argument, I've considered this argument. Here's what I think the right answer is and here's why. And so there's a big gap between, "I talked to my mom about this and she thinks it's crazy," and, "Here's my final verdict on the debate between consequentialist and deontologists," or something. But all along the way you're kind of building that ability to give reasons for a view and weigh reasons for a view.

Speaker 2: So what do you want students to walk away with after your course? If they're learning about these historical figures and they're practicing in these conversations and then they have the opportunity to express themselves, then what happens?

Jeffrey Watson: Yeah, I guess there's multiple goals. I mean, one thing is simply being literate in some of these views is a helpful thing. All the people that we're studying are figures whose ideas is often, whose names even, are part of our bigger cultural discourse. And so being able to read something when someone's making an argument in a newspaper on some political issue or something, or someone's making an argument to you personally on something, being able to identify the historical sources of that, the underlying ideas for that, the motivations for that, and sometimes to even challenge those ideas, that's just a useful thing for being a citizen in a community. And so I think one goal of the course is just the ability to engage in that kind of conversation. But another goal is kind of what I was mentioning earlier, which is that ability to defend your own argument towards something, to foresee objections and respond to them.

That's a valuable skill that it ultimately kind of the end goal of, again, pretty much all of my classes is can you come away with that ability to respond an argument, defend your views, lay out your views so that whatever you end up doing, you're able to, I guess, feel confident about your ability to persuade people. That's an important skill, whether you're, I mean, some of my students

go into law school and that's literally their interest is their ability to persuade someone of a point in fairly technical detail.

Or if you're just writing an email to someone at work and you need to get the point across and you need to get it across pretty succinctly and logically so it's really hard for someone to disagree. Those are all valuable skills. So it's not a persuasive writing class, but part of persuasion is thinking logically and understanding different perspectives and maybe thinking more slowly. And so that's part of the value I think of the course is that ability to slow down and weigh things.

Speaker 2: Which is so important as well. What type of student takes your course? Do you find that students take your course because they're earnestly interested in the History of Ethics or maybe they're on a particular major path?

Jeffrey Watson: Well, if I'm looking at the enrollment, it's usually about 50 50. So about 50% of students or so are majors who are in either our standard philosophy major or our morality, politics and law major. Those are students who have decided they want to study philosophy, and this is kind of a key part of it. This particular course within that morality, politics and law major is one of the key courses, especially for online students, that they have this choice of this and an ethical theory class, but they have to take one. And it's important for that major. I mean, the end goal of understanding those things, you want to know the history. But then about half of students are students who are taking it for general humanities credit or maybe their first philosophy class, or they took one other philosophy class and they wanted to take another.

And the class really is geared for students to be able to jump in without any prior backgrounds. So I teach some other courses that do have some pretty clear prerequisites, but this one does not. It's very much something that's geared towards students who may just be, "Hey, I want to take my one philosophy class and understand something." But often it is an understanding of those moral questions that someone's interested in. I mean, History of Ethics, the word ethics, I think is the bigger pull. The history part is a little scary to some people at first. "Oh no, we're going to have to do history." But it's not really a history class. I don't teach it like a historian necessarily. It's just the history in terms of the narrative. But the word ethics or the moral questions, I think are what bring a lot of people to the class.

Speaker 2: Let me ask you, on the home page of this course, you go into a short narrative about the connection between philosophy and happiness. So what do you mean by this?

Jeffrey Watson: Sure, sure.

Speaker 2: Why do you bring this up right on the very first page?

Jeffrey Watson: Yeah. So part of what I want to address is, there are different motivations for taking different courses. I'm assuming anyone who's on the homepage has signed up for the course so they had to have some motivation to get there. And the way I see it, there two basic motivations, and it's usually a combination of the two that drive you to sign up for a course. And one is something is a 'means towards happiness', and the other is that it's 'a part of happiness'. So what I mean by a 'means towards happiness' is that the thing itself might be difficult and might not be fun, it might not be the thing you most enjoy, but you know that when you've done that, you're going to have some ability or some credential or some prerequisite for the ability and the credential, but you're going to have something that you can do something with.

And then a second motivation, I say 'a part of happiness' is that a part of living a good life, a part of happy life. When I say a good life, I mean a happy life. Life that is worth living is engaging in this thing. And so every college class probably has a degree of each of those, and it's probably a little different for each person. I know people for whom calculus was a part of happiness. It was not for me, it was a means to an end and

Speaker 2: Metaphysics.

Jeffrey Watson: Metaphysics for me, that's part of happiness but I know for some people that might be a means to their end. So, I think History of Ethics is the kind of class, and a lot of philosophy classes, to be honest, that you really have to take as part of happiness, not necessarily as a means to happiness. I mean, it's not clear to me that there's an immediate outcome. You take the class and then someone goes, "Oh, hey, you took a History of Ethics class. Well come over here and solve our dilemma for us," right? I mean, that'd be nice if people did that. They haven't done that for me yet, but we'll see. But you take it as a part of happiness, that is, you're a reasoning, thinking being. You have a mind. Your mind, by its very nature, wants to engage in evaluation of things and wants to understand things, and it wants to understand them more clearly.

And often what we encounter when we deal with these tricky ethical issues or moral issues or philosophical issues, is we feel like there's a problem there. We want to know how to solve it and explain it, but we don't have a structure for thinking through it. We don't have the framework to think about it in. And so part of taking a philosophy class is you get that structure, that framework, those reasons, that way of thinking about it.

Not that it tells you the answer, but it tells you how to think about the question. So the History of Ethics class is a class that's very much about getting, I guess, as part of that enjoyment of your own ability to think, that structure that helps you think about why things are, and in some ways just immersing yourself in the questions too. So yeah, I guess that's sort of the point I want to make on the homepage is, if you're taking this class, it's because it's part of what it is for you to live a good life as the way you understand what a good life is as a thinking

thing. You're using your reason in that way, and thinking through things in this way is something that fulfills your function as mind.

Speaker 2: Well, thank you so much for joining us today. It was an excellent conversation. I really appreciate your time and all of the information that you've given us. Thank you so much to our listeners for joining today's Course Story of PHI 3 3 5, The History of Ethics with its instructor and course developer, Jeffrey Watson.

Jeffrey Watson: Thanks.

Deanna Soth: So Jeff and I have a really good Instructional Designer, instructor relationship where Jeff is very savvy, so it's like I don't have to teach him how to do technical things in Canvas necessarily, but he asks really good design questions of, "Am I doing this the right way? Is there a better way to do this? Do you think students will be engaged?" These are all really great questions to ask an Instructional Designer. The designers are so thirsty to talk about these things, and so I can't recommend enough reaching out to an Instructional Designer to talk about your classes that you're teaching. They'll have a lot of great things to say and you'll get a lot of good ideas from them.

Mary Loader: I've got to tell you, my favorite conversations to be involved in are not around technology, although I'm always willing to help, but they definitely are framed around ideas and how to accomplish the things that they've been doing in their on ground, in person classroom, online, as well, if not better. Those are the fun conversations.

Deanna Soth: Yeah. The strategy and the why. The why are you doing this? Have you considered other options? Designers love it.

Mary Loader: And it's hard sometimes for faculty when they move online because they're used to doing it one way and then to have a different perspective on how you could accomplish that goal.

Deanna Soth: Well, and they have a limited experience of their online education. They might have taken online courses before, but we are trying to promote a more elevated-

Mary Loader: Experience.

Deanna Soth: Experience, and there's just so many possibilities,

Mary Loader: So many. So many good things to share. That's why we started this podcast.

Ricardo Leon: I've done two podcasts based around Instructional Designers so there's definitely a lot to talk about, and it's definitely a good group.

Deanna Soth: Well, there's a reason why designers literally get master's degrees in Instructional Designer education because there's just so much. And so we don't expect faculty necessarily to be experts in design, and that's why it's a good partnership to have an instructor who's an expert in their field partnered with a designer who is an expert at education. So that pairing is just-

Mary Loader: So key.

Deanna Soth: Chef's kiss.

Mary Loader: Ooh la la.

Ricardo Leon: Well, Deanna, do you have anything you want to plug? Any ways people can reach out to you?

Deanna Soth: So I would invite anyone to check out our Webinars that my team offers around Instructional Design and best practice for teaching online. And that could be found at teachonline.asu.edu/webinars.

Mary Loader: Love that site. Great amount of offerings this year, and if you don't see something that you'd like us to talk about, feel free to email us at Core Stories. We'll make sure that the webinar and workshops folks hear your request, and we'll add that to our workshop repertoire.

Ricardo Leon: Well, thank you, Deanna.

Mary Loader: Yay.

Deanna Soth: Thanks for having me.

Mary Loader: Oh, we're so happy you were able to come out.

Deanna Soth: Hey.

Mary Loader: Hi, listeners. We're coming up on the last episode of season one of Course Stories.

Ricardo Leon: The last episode? Are you serious?

Mary Loader: The very last one of this season?

Ricardo Leon: Well, when's the next season?

Mary Loader: That's a good question. When do we want to have the next season? We have so many things to continue to explore.

Ricardo Leon: Yeah, I think in the fall, I think taking some time in the summer to maybe do some special episodes. That might be fun. So it's actually... Listener, we're talking directly to you. We were talking to each other before, but now just to you, it's very, very important that you subscribe to the podcast because

Mary Loader: If you don't, you'll miss it.

Ricardo Leon: You'll miss it. There'll be things that are going to be coming out this summer that you might miss. So we're not going to have the regular release schedule, but we will have something per u... Often.

Mary Loader: Every once in a while.

Ricardo Leon: Every once in a while.

Mary Loader: When we feel like it.

Ricardo Leon: When we need to.

Mary Loader: And we're not on vacation.

Ricardo Leon: Right.

Mary Loader: But we hope you enjoy us on vacation.

Ricardo Leon: Yeah, listen to us at the beach.

Mary Loader: Yeah. Go back to the first episode. There's so much you can learn from the faculty we've already talked to.

Ricardo Leon: Absolutely. Absolutely. So Mary, what do they need to do?

Mary Loader: Subscribe.

Ricardo Leon: Yes, and you can do that wherever you listen to podcasts. Hope to see you again during the summer and also ultimately in season two in the fall.

Mary Loader: See you soon.

Ricardo Leon: Course Stories is produced by the Instructional Design and New Media team at Ed Plus at Arizona State University. Course Stories is available wherever you listen to podcasts.

You can reach us at core_stories@asu.edu. If you're an instructor at ASU online, tell us your core story and we may feature it in the future episode. Thanks for listening.

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