

Thinking critically

Tess Redgrave talks to a Philosophy lecturer about the unique approach he and his team have adopted to teaching a stage one course. Godfrey Boehnke took the photos.

Meet Madame Swami the unhappy medium who can only predict things that happened yesterday, sleazy American Game show host Chip D.Hardstuff, and Mildly Miffed of Milford.

These are just some of the characters that feature in the Philosophy Department's stage one course titled "Critical thinking".

Co-ordinated by lecturer Jonathan Keown-Green, Philosophy 105 explores how people reason by using a variety of novel techniques. "Madness and antics," he quips.

A lecture I sat in on began with four people standing up at the front, each holding up large cards which, when strung together, read 4, 3, B, A.

"Okay we've got a letter on one side of these cards and a number on the other," Jonathan told students. "If we're following the rule that says a card with a vowel on one side must have an odd number on the other side, then which of these cards do we have to turn to check?"

"Do we need to turn 3 around for example?"

"No because the rule doesn't say if you've got an odd number on one side then there must be a vowel on the other.

"But do we need to turn 4 around?"

"Yes you're right and deserve a lot of biscuits," he complimented a student, "because as you say, if we turn 4 around and its got an E on it, then it's violated the rule."

Called the Wason test, Jonathan used this puzzle to open his lecture on conditional statements – arguments that rely on the idea "that if something is one kind of thing, then its got to be something else".

Later in the same lecture Philosophy masters student Nicola Clarke (pictured above) stretched a grey-coloured French beret over her long hair and sat erect at an old-fashioned manual Olympia typewriter.

"Dear Sir," she spoke in a high-toned, posh voice. "I hardly ever put pen to paper but I'm worried about the tiny tots who put thumb to button. It is time to give the Thumbs Up to restrictions on cell phone use by our youngsters. If the youth of 2006 continue to text each other at the present rate, this form of communication will become second nature to them. If it becomes second nature, then it will become an automatic reflex. If it's an automatic reflex, then it will be as natural a form of communication as speech itself. And if that happens, it won't be long before our pre-teens are texting in their sleep. If they sleep-text, who knows who they might be sleep-texting, what they might be saying and what sort of bill they might be running up. Sleep walking and sleep talking are trouble enough. We must do what we can to curb the risk of sleep-texting! Yours truly Mildy Miffed of Milford."

An example of the kinds of faulty arguments often found in newspaper letters to the editor, this animated illustration was used to explain slippery slope and chain arguments.

"These sorts of arguments say a first innocent step leads to a long, long chain which ends in disaster, so blow that, we don't want disaster so we won't take the first step," says Jonathan.

Mildly Miffed of Milford was not the only character to appear during the lecture: we also met Ron from Ruawai who used a dysfunctional chain argument to urge city dwellers against buying four-wheel drive vehicles, and students erupted into laughter when Captain Corin, Space

Co-lecturers' Dr Jonathan Keown-Green and Matthew Dentith



Pirate and Insurance Salesman arrived persuading all he met to buy insurance while images of a pirate ship flashed on the overhead screen.

A former music teacher, Jonathan inherited the "Critical thinking" course when he joined the Philosophy Department's teaching staff, after completing a PhD on the Philosophy of Language at Princeton University, in 2002. After some critical thinking of his own, he decided that rather than follow the usual approach to this topic – teaching students thinking skills – he would teach them about mistakes.

"Critical thinking is a buzz word from the second half of the 20th century," he explains. "If your approach is informed by contemporary cognitive psychology and mistakes people make in reasoning, as well as by recent thought about the way arguments are structured, then you're out on your own in terms of how you teach the subject.

"Instead of teaching students how to think, I decided I'd teach them how not to think – take a negative approach. So we give them some facts and technical stuff about logic, which then become tools to explore mistakes. It's an information-based approach and there's a big literature analysing argumentation, which we draw on. Unlike a lot of other stage one courses, this is very dependent on recent scholarship."

Amassing a team of enthusiastic doctorate and masters students around him, and in tandem with co-lecturer Matthew Dentith, Jonathan decided he would use puzzles, game shows, sketches, stock characters who return, and even develop an on going serial, as a way to present some of these mistakes during lectures.

"I can't work with a large class like this unless it's a performance," says Jonathan who is blind and during the lecture I sat in on used a Braille Note machine to co-ordinate his words with text appearing on overhead screens.

Sometimes Jonathan, who plays keyboards, is joined by his wife Philippa McKeown-Green, a flute-player and music librarian at the School of Music, to play live music during lectures.

"I'm sure some students do a lot better in the course because of this approach and some don't like it and think its fooling around," Jonathan muses. "For me it's a matter of personal integrity. I just can't get up there in front of a 100 students and not perform, it just doesn't



The Philosophy team from left: Lauren Ashwell, Nicola Clarke, Matthew Dentith, Aness Kim, Dr Jonathan McKeown-Green, Imran Aijaz, Jonathan Farrell. Not pictured but also part of the team: Aaron Erb, Tahua O'Leary and Olwyn Stewart.

make sense. This is the best way I know of to get this material across, to show the funny side of it, but also to show how important it is, that it really matters.”

Stage one arts and law student Matthew Piper, who took Philosophy 105 in the second semester this year, says he has “genuinely loved the course and that’s the general consensus among other students too.

“I’ve particularly enjoyed the fact its ‘edutainment’. If you went along to a 105 lecture with a slack attitude, and not intending to learn anything, you’d still come away with a critical thinking concept,” he says. “You can’t help but get engaged.”

Matthew says the course has fuelled his interest in philosophy “and it’s really made me think differently. I can see through everyday flaws in arguments in the newspaper ...that sort of thing.”

Professor John Bishop, head of the Philosophy Department, says Jonathan combines academic excellence with a great concern for pedagogy.

“He’s constantly thinking ‘what’s the best way to convey this material to students’ and I admire him for that.

“Because he’s blind, he needs people to assist him, and perhaps because of that he’s gathered a very good team of masters and doctoral students around him who have caught his passion for pedagogy. So Jonathan is not just destined to be a unique phenomenon but also a great teacher of others.”

Professor Bishop points out that perhaps the greatest indication of Philosophy 105’s success is that it’s been chosen as the Philosophy Department’s General Education Course, open to undergraduates from the first semester next year.

It will also be run as one of the University’s Summer School courses during January and February 2006 and Jonathan is looking forward to his material reaching a wider audience.

“Faulty reasoning gets in the way of public debate, leads to bad journalism, and to problems in personal relationships – so it’s important stuff.”

He gives me an example of a couple arguing: “‘You talk like that all the time, says A, so B replies ‘Alright I won’t say anything at all!’

“People are always creating these false oppositions,” he observes.

“It seems to me that they show we systematically reason quite badly.”

Another intriguing aspect to the 24-lecture “Critical thinking” course is that students go on a field trip to Devonport’s North Head where they gather empirical evidence to assess conspiracy theories surrounding the mountain’s tunnel complex. These have circulated since the “Russian scare” of the 1890s when there were false fears that Russian warships were heading to New Zealand; after the Second World War, rumours of seaplanes and decayed ammunition being stored in the tunnels flourished.

In the 1990s the Department of Conservation carried out a series of excavations and reported that the ex-military installation was not hiding military equipment or additional tunnels. Nonetheless, this did little to quell the rumours.

“The tunnels at North Head provide a fascinating opportunity to look at logic, conspiracy theories, distortion of eyewitness accounts and the propagation of rumours,” says Jonathan.

In lectures and tutorials his team discuss with students the argument types used to support different claims about North Head.

“We then go and get shown around, do some empirical work, and come back and display the arguments.”

As well as North Head, Jonathan has used the recent general election and the Labour government’s anti-smoking legislation as case studies to look at the sorts of false arguments people put forward to defend a particular opinion.

He is now contemplating using the controversial foreshore and seabed legislation as a case study but is concerned that student opinions might get in the way of seeing the logic of their particular argument.

“What’s interesting about all this is working out what is really going on in the structure of arguments when people put forward a bit of reasoning? What’s the logical situation? That’s what I’m trying to teach at this level.”

To find out more about Philosophy 105 see www.arts.auckland.ac.nz. For information on the University’s Summer School see the University website www.auckland.ac.nz from mid-November, or pick up a Summer School prospectus from the Student Information Centre.