

How and why to teach consciousness

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Consciousness poses three pedagogical challenges: helping students 1) understand that there's a problem at all; 2) grasp precisely what the problem is and is not; and 3) accept that, despite the many theories of consciousness, there is no agreed definition of consciousness, no solution to the problems yet, nor even a broadly accepted approach to generating one. We researchers, too, sometimes need help with all three. But these challenges are also opportunities. Responsible teaching about consciousness that takes them all seriously can further high-quality research, by forcing instructors to avoid both succumbing to "pet theory syndrome" and drowning in a sea of theories with no tools for critical appraisal.

Teaching consciousness well involves encouraging students (and ourselves) to practise epistemic humility. In particular, it requires us to question our intuitions rather than take them for granted. Defamiliarizing intuitions is even more relevant in consciousness studies than in other fields, given the possibility that the entire problem is itself a function of false or misleading intuitions. Illusionism proposes that the hard problem be shifted from "how do we bridge the mind/matter gap?" to "how and why have we been fooled into thinking there is a mind/matter gap?". Effective teaching allows both students and instructors to test the potential of illusionism as one possible route to sidestepping the hard problem.

There are many ways to make strange the apparently self-evident, and the simplest are often the most effective. Apparently trivial class demonstrations of tricky topics, involving simple props and volunteer students, can be highly effective intuition pumps and elicit clearer inquiry than reading and talking could. In this session we offer short interactive demos from our 2018 textbook, *Consciousness: An Introduction* (3rd ed.) such as the teletransporter, philosopher's zombie, and sentience line.

Throughout our teaching, and in the textbook, we encourage direct inquiry into subjectivity, for example by giving students questions to ask themselves during everyday life, like "Am I conscious now?" or "Was this decision conscious?". This helps students keep returning to the starting point (what actually is conscious experience?) and so equips them for well-grounded scientific inquiry. We also offer real-world examples of how changes like those created by psychoactive drugs or psychopathologies can alter the baseline for folk intuitions and thus the attractive force of specific theoretical frameworks like dualism or panpsychism.

The workings of our own minds clearly exert strong influences on the way consciousness is studied and thought about. Other forces with potentially distorting effects can, likewise, be countered by structured interrogation. Two prime candidates are brain imaging and natural language use. Correlation-based imaging methods encourage researchers to unreflectively equate the neural correlates of cognitive processes (which clearly exist) with the neural correlates of consciousness (which are rife with ontological problems). Meanwhile, the structures of ordinary language

push us over and over again into dualism—because the folk psychology that language coevolved with was arguably “born dualist”. Both instructors and students can learn (in subject-specific and more personal ways) by questioning all forms of the apparently obvious.

Keywords: consciousness; illusionism; intuition pumps; pedagogy; teaching

Comments (not for publication) [200 character limit]: We propose to co-present with interactive demos. Our aim is not self-promotion, but to draw on lessons from co-authoring (including recent comments from 9 reviewers) to explore teaching challenges.

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