

About the Case Studies

The Forward Thinking Project has developed a series of case studies aimed at identifying (i) key issues in learning and teaching Philosophy in Australian universities and (ii) innovative approaches to teaching and learning Philosophy.

The project has produced two kinds of case studies:

- Commentaries on issues arising in philosophical pedagogy and innovative responses to those issues raised at round table discussions
- Summary of ALTC citation winners from the Philosophy discipline.

Commentaries on Issues

- [Evaluation](#)
- [Encouraging attendance at tutorials](#)
- [Encouraging tutorial preparation](#)
- [Teaching philosophy to non philosophy majors/first year students](#)
- [Teaching Ethics to non philosophy majors](#)
- [Teaching philosophy outside the BA/to non philosophy majors](#)

Evaluation

Key terms: evaluation, progression, assessment, mode of delivery

PROBLEM/ISSUE

In order to facilitate learning and teaching in the discipline, a Philosophy Department in a well-established University needed more information about undergraduate student experiences.

APPROACH

The Department ran a series of focus groups. The focus group organizers felt that it was important that the groups not be facilitated by permanent members of the teaching staff; however, they also felt it was important that the facilitators be familiar with issues in learning and teaching Philosophy in universities. To solve this problem, the organizers hired young, "funky" Philosophy graduate students to facilitate the focus groups using questions prepared on advice from their institution's learning and teaching centre. Undergraduate students were recruited to the focus groups by announcement at lectures. Attendance at the focus groups was voluntary. Tea, coffee and biscuits were provided. The facilitators took notes at the meeting and provided feedback to the organizers immediately after the meeting.

DISCUSSION

The focus group organizers were very pleased with the outcome of the focus groups. About twenty undergraduates attended, with good representation from across the year levels. Both students majoring in Philosophy and students majoring in other areas attended. The focus groups provided useful feedback on three key areas.

1. *Progression* Students very strongly favoured vertical integration of courses, including the use of prerequisites and marked differentiation between year levels.
2. *Choice* Many students voiced a preference for choice in the areas of assessment mode and topics covered. Whilst the students acknowledged that core material had to be covered in any course, they favoured having the opportunity to choose amongst non-core offerings. Similarly, whilst they recognized that institutions place restrictions on assessment, they wanted maximum choices within those restrictions.
3. *Mode of delivery* A number of students were strongly opposed to the on-line delivery of course materials, and expressed a strong preference for traditional modes of delivery with an emphasis on lectures and tutorials. Students reported a higher level of engagement when teaching materials are presented in the traditional "talk and chalk" fashion, and valued the opportunity to philosophise about the issues in-class rather than merely received pre-packaged content. (See the [Final Report](#) and the Report on [Undergraduate Learning and Teaching](#) for further comments on on-line teaching).

Adelaide Round Table Discussion 26/11/2009

Encouraging attendance at tutorials

Key terms: participation, assessment, active engagement

PROBLEM/ISSUE

Tutorials in the discipline of Philosophy are not simply means whereby staff transmit information to students; they are an opportunity for students to work out their own ideas through interaction with other students in a supportive environment. Unfortunately, with the demands of paid employment, contemporary students are often tempted to skip tutorials. Moreover, it is clear that the function of the tutorial cannot be achieved if students merely attend. Students must *actively engage* in the learning process if they are to benefit from tutorials. Recognizing this, a number of Australian Philosophy Departments have sought to raise not only student attendance at tutorials, but also student participation.

APPROACHES

1. *Participation marks* Many Philosophy Departments give marks for tutorial participation—typically around about 10% of the student's overall grade (see the Report on [Undergraduate Learning and Teaching](#) for further comments on assessment). In the first lecture of the course, the coordinator carefully explains the difference between (merely) attending and participating. Students' attention is drawn to a variety of ways in which they can participate.
2. *Reading tasks* Students are far more likely to participate in tutorials if they have completed the relevant reading before coming to class. Some courses in the Philosophy Department at Flinders have weekly short assignments which test the students' knowledge of the reading. In more than one Australian university, Philosophy staff have experimented with Reading Journals. Each student must keep a journal with a half page entry for each reading. In some Philosophy Departments, the staff have experimented with reading blogs. Each student must keep a blog on which they record a few thoughts about every reading. Students must also post a comment on the blog of at least one other student. (For a discussion of the use of workbooks to encourage students' preparation for class, see the

Sydney Round Table commentary 'encouraging student's to prepare for class each week').

3. *Group presentations* A number of Departments have experimented with group presentations by students at tutorials.

DISCUSSION

Many of the academics at the Adelaide round table felt that participation marks are probably unavoidable. However, participation marks must be handled very carefully. Shy students can be disadvantaged, and efforts must be made to ensure that women have the opportunity to voice their ideas.

There was strong support for reading tasks. One issue that was raised concerned the amount of time marking the reading tasks can take. Automating reading task marking using webCT systems is one option worth exploring.

Group presentations have mixed success. There is a tendency for students to reduce their attendance once they have made their presentation. In addition, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that students dislike group assessment. One way to avoid this is to make each student in the group responsible for submitting their own written version of the presentation.

Adelaide Round Table Discussion 26/11/2009

Encouraging tutorial preparation

Key terms: participation, engagement, assessment, attendance

PROBLEM/ISSUE

Encouraging students to prepare for class each week. A persistent problem, which many academics think is getting worse, is the failure of students to prepare for class each week. The issue is not only that students do not complete the assigned readings, but also that they do not reflect adequately on the readings.

APPROACH

Various people had used workbooks as a successful way of correcting this, especially at 2nd year. Workbooks or research portfolios took a number of forms, from on-line posts written fortnightly with a maximum of 200 words, to workbooks with a more flexible format with no maximum length or specified format. They ranged in value from 15% to 30% of the overall grade for the course. Workbooks were generally seen as a forum for students to engage with the broad themes of a course, but were considered to be especially useful as a systematic space outside the classroom to examine a course's core readings. Expectations of what students were to do in the workbooks were varied: short fortnightly reading summaries, summaries of readings directed by specific questions or themes, a forum to encourage students to connect readings to their experience and interests, a space in which students can work out ideas for subsequent inclusion in essays. All those who used the workbook thought it encouraged participation and that students reluctantly enjoyed the consistent engagement.

DISCUSSION

1. *Excessive marking.* Some people had tried some version of a workbook previously and found that while successful it was too labour intensive. Others thought one could mark them very quickly. One academic used short on-line posts that she found could be marked very quickly. Many at the round table considered that it would be useful for both learning and for facilitating class discussion but to work successfully would need regular feedback and oversight that made it too much work.
2. *Feedback.* The academic who used on-line workbook with short posts was able to give regular feedback that students found very helpful since their performance throughout the semester and their engagement with the entirety of the course is assessed.
3. *Attendance.* There was a general agreement that such consistent work made attendance much better and the class much more enjoyable for teachers and students.
4. *Overall student satisfaction.* Many thought that this type of assessment, when properly done, made the course and learning experience much more successful because it led to a more sustained engagement with course content and with other students in the course.
5. *Length and quality.* Some thought that keeping the weekly posts short was a good approach because it encouraged succinct writing. Concerns were raised that the workbook/research portfolio did not work too well unless properly monitored throughout the semester since many students just cobbled it together from lecture notes at the end of semester. Nevertheless on balance it was felt that the workbook made more students engaged with the course and reading material.

Sydney University Round Table Discussion 10/11/2009

Teaching philosophy to non philosophy majors/first year students

Key terms: assessment, ethics, participation, online discussion

PROBLEM/ISSUE

Philosophy attracts many students in first year who do not intend to continue with it as major or minor. Moreover many of the students in level one philosophy are from disciplines other than the humanities and social sciences—this is especially the case in courses such as critical thinking and service courses in ethics. The difficulty of philosophical texts can be a challenge to such students. The issue is how to make it more accessible to less motivated students or students who are not committed to the discipline.

APPROACH

The current teaching environment is for the most part severely resource constrained so any innovation in teaching designed to keep students interested and engaged in the subject has to be resource neutral. In a large first year ethics unit at one Australian university the staff introduced a tightly focused assessment task at the very beginning of semester. A topical ethical issue was posted in an on-line forum and students were asked to write a short response. Students then had to respond to three student's posts from their tutorial. Tutors acted as moderators.

This simple exercise was very beneficial in maintaining student interest in the course and its content. It provided a non-threatening forum in which students could receive feedback from tutors and helped students to get to know each other since the discussion was organised in tutorial groups. It also helped students to engage with the course early in the semester since the responses did not require detailed knowledge of course content and so could be answered from the very beginning of semester. Because of the applied

nature of the questions students could immediately see the relevance of course to their own lives.

DISCUSSION

1. *Are classroom dynamics that are problematic in tutorials (dominating/reticent students) reproduced in on-line fora?* Yes they can be. Good moderation is just as important on-line as in the classroom. An over confident student can easily dominate because unlike in a tutorial there is no tutor to cut people off and redirect or ask questions of others. Making the forum an assessment task that is taken seriously and well monitored may help to keep students focused and less likely to be domineering. Reticent students reported that they were more inclined to be involved than in class discussion.
2. *Experience of on-line discussion in other level one courses.* Other Australian philosophy programs have used a similar format for critical thinking. In general students find it very useful. One survey of student experience showed overwhelming support for this forum. Students average 14 posts. It was stressed that to work well it has to be well monitored and moderated.
3. *Should on-line discussion/exercises be a central part of the course?* In general people thought it was a useful supplement and was complementary. It could be a useful forum for students to explore issues without the restriction of the classroom, since they could be anonymous and they had time to think and reflect.

Sydney University Round Table Discussion 10/11/2009

Teaching Ethics to non philosophy majors

Key terms: teaching outside the BA/philosophy major, ethics, empowerment

PROBLEM/ISSUE

Australian universities place considerable stress on preparing students for professional life. Introducing students to ideas in professional ethics is an important aspect of professional training. However, teaching professional ethics to students not majoring in Philosophy presents two kinds of problems. On the one hand, students are often unconvinced of the relevance of studying ethics to their career. Secondly, the background knowledge which upper level students majoring in Philosophy typically bring to their courses is generally absent in the case of students from outside the Philosophy major taking professional ethics.

APPROACH

At the University of Western Australia, philosophy staff teamed up with staff from the Business School to develop an approach to teaching professional ethics which they called "Giving Voice to Values". They began with the observation that many students in the professional areas disvalue ethics education because they believe that, as employees in large organizations, they will lack the power to implement ethical practices. The teaching team therefore built their professional ethics course around the notion of *empowerment*. They began by developing their students' understanding of professional values and of the organizational structures in which those values may be realized. They then assisted the students to acquire the communication skills needed to articulate good ethical practices within modern organizations.

DISCUSSION

The course has led to a seismic shift in both the way students understand professional values and in the way they perceive themselves as employees in major organizations. Strikingly, the course allows the teaching staff to take the students into philosophical territory which is normally closed to them. Once the students realize that they can effect change within organizations, they become motivated to study deeper philosophical questions about the nature of ethics.

Adelaide Round Table Discussion 26/11/2009

Teaching philosophy outside the BA/to non philosophy majors

Key terms: participation, peer instruction

PROBLEM/ISSUE

Maintaining student interest in lectures in large courses that often serve as service courses, and gauging 'real time' student understanding of lecture material.

APPROACH

One Australian philosophy program is planning to introduce clicker technology in one of its large first year critical thinking courses. Currently the critical thinking course has a format that involves exegesis of a particular critical thinking issue for 10-15 minutes. Students are then invited to talk with their neighbour about the problem. One way the clickers can be used to gauge understanding involves presenting an example in the lecture; students then use the clickers to express an opinion on which critical thinking fallacy, if any, is present. Students will vote on which fallacy they think is applicable once the example is presented and then again after they have discussed it with their neighbour. The lecturer would not move to the next issue/example until 66% of students have got the correct answer.

DISCUSSION

1. *Maintaining interest throughout a one hour lecture.* Many people thought that a one hour lecture was a long time for first years to concentrate, especially in service courses such as critical thinking. Clickers might be used successfully to help break up the hour block of the standard 'chalk and talk' format and thereby help maintain student interest.
2. *Writing skills.* Worries were raised that this type of technology would shift student interest too far in the direction of a visual and 'game playing' learning experience that did not develop students' oral and written skills, which are already perceived to be deteriorating.
3. *Impact on critical thinking.* Concerns were raised that this type of technology would not foster sustained and coherent thought about an issue or problem and would not encourage students to read properly, and think and reflect in a systematic manner. Some participants were also worried that clickers would reinforce interest in simply getting a correct answer rather than focusing on methodical philosophical reflection. There were also concerns that this technology was pandering to a mindset of instant gratification and short attention spans.

Sydney University Round Table Discussion 10/11/2009

Use of the clicker technology is the focus of the 'Peer Instruction in the Humanities' (ALTC funded). See Bigelow, J., Butchart, S and Handfield, T. (2007), *Peer Instruction in the Humanities*, Report to Carrick Institute of Teaching and Learning. Available online at: <http://www.altc.edu.au/resource-peer-instruction-humanities-monash-2007>. Also the project website : <http://>

[arts.monash.edu.au/philosophy/peer-instruction/.](https://arts.monash.edu.au/philosophy/peer-instruction/)