

Teaching Early Modern Philosophy collaboratively with Team-Based Learning

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COURSE OUTLINE

History of Early Modern Philosophy is a second-year course that offers an introduction to the collaborative philosophical debates in early modern philosophy, during the period from Descartes to Kant. It focuses not only on collaborative work that was done during the early modern period, but it also aims to recreate the historical dialogues in the classroom through formative assessment tasks such as letters that students write to the thinkers whose work we read in class. To create a collaborative and inclusive atmosphere in the classroom this course is designed as a Team-Based Learning class and students work in permanent teams for the entire semester.

By using Team-Based Learning as my pedagogical approach I am able to overcome problems that regularly occur in more traditional teaching approaches to early modern philosophy. For example, my students were continuously motivated to read the assigned texts, which prepared them for high quality in-class discussions. While many students report that they find the material intellectually challenging, the permanent team-structure created a supportive learning environment where my students mastered the challenges as a team and thereby learned more than in a more traditional classroom. Moreover, the collaborative approach enabled me to bring historical debates to life in the classroom and rather than regarding history of philosophy as antiquated – as is a not uncommon perception when history of philosophy is taught traditionally – the teaching approach and the task design helped to create awareness of the relevance of the debates.

RATIONALE FOR THE COURSE DESIGN

Philosophy was done collaboratively during the early modern period. Unfortunately, the history of philosophy has often been received in terms of major works by male geniuses, who – as the myth goes – produced their masterpieces in isolation. Such a conception of the history of philosophy is problematic, not only for reasons of historical accuracy, but also because it falsely portrays the history of philosophy as non-inclusive and thereby contributes to gender and minorities-exclusion problems in the discipline of philosophy. As Jacqueline Broad noted in a recent blog post, “the discipline of philosophy has been rather slow to recognise this collaborative history.”¹

My second-year course *History of Early Modern Philosophy* remedies these problems through its **collaborative design**. The collaborative aspect is reflected in both the content and the pedagogical teaching approach: I integrate theory and practice by making collaborative learning in teams an integral part of the course.

When I designed *History of Early Modern Philosophy* I used the following **philosophical and pedagogical aims** as my guidelines:

- (1) Create awareness that early modern philosophy was collaborative and involved dialogues and exchanges of ideas among many intellectuals, including women philosophers.
- (2) Recreate these collaborative dialogues in the classroom.
- (3) Design effective tasks that involve all students and promote an inclusive and collaborative classroom.
- (4) Provide opportunities to practice philosophical skills through team activities and continuous assessment tasks.
- (5) Provide opportunities to develop social skills by working respectfully with other team members.

Pedagogical Approach

The **teaching method** that best enables me to achieve these aims is **Team-Based Learning** (TBL).² Team-Based Learning is a method that has been developed by Larry Michaelsen and others; it has been highly successful in North America and is spreading worldwide. In a TBL course students work in permanent teams throughout the entire semester and complete some tests as teams. A TBL course has a distinctive structure. It is commonly divided into four or five units³ over a semester and each unit has the same structure:

¹ See <http://blog.oup.com/2015/10/women-history-philosophy/>.

² Very helpful information and resources about TBL can be found at the Team-Based Learning Collaborative website: <http://www.teambasedlearning.org> and the Learn TBL website <http://learntbl.ca>. For further information see also Bill Roberson and Billie Franchini, “Effective Task-Design in the TBL Classroom”, *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 25 (2014), 275-302; Kimberly Van Orman, “Teaching Philosophy with Team-Based Learning”, *AAPT Studies in Pedagogy* (2015), Online First.

³ The term “unit” is here and in the following used to refer to a learning sequence of roughly three weeks that focuses on a particular topic and/or particular thinkers.

- Before the start of a unit students are assigned readings that introduce them to key concepts and theories that will be covered in the unit. They complete the readings outside class.
- On the first day of the unit they will take a Readiness Assurance Test. They take the test first individually, and then they take the same test again as a team. Students use Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique cards, which are like lottery scratchcards.⁴ They have the opportunity to appeal answers as a team, provided they can offer textual evidence in support of a different answer option.
 - * Comment: The team tests are an important moment when teams build a team identity. Students start to discuss critically what *reasons* they each have for selecting a particular answer and in light of these reasons they try to agree on a team answer. Almost always the team score is higher than the individual scores and this helps students to see how much more they can learn *collaboratively*. The opportunity to appeal test answers encourages close engagement with the relevant readings.
- During the remaining sessions of the unit students engage deeper with the materials and solve tasks in their teams that stimulate them to think critically about the material and to apply the material to new examples and situations.

Because students work in permanent teams in a TBL classroom and complete some tests as teams, it is absolutely crucial for the success of every student and for the success of the teams that the teams work as effectively as possible. The strategy that is used in a TBL classroom to ensure this is that students assess the performance of all their team members. They complete two rounds of informal peer evaluations throughout the semester. This feedback is meant to be constructive and intended to help teams and individual students to improve their performance. At the end of the semester they complete a final round of peer evaluations and this score counts 5% towards their final grade. Peer evaluations are important to establish a sense of fairness and give teams an opportunity to reflect on their interaction with their team members.

How TBL helps to achieve the learning aims

I will now explain how Team-Based Learning enables me to achieve the aims of my *History of Early Modern Philosophy* course.

Re (1): To create awareness that history of early modern philosophy was collaborative, I designed the units such that most units cover the views of two or more philosophers on specific topics. For example, in the first unit, we contrast Descartes's and Spinoza's view on modes and substances, and the relation between mind and body, we discuss Princess Elisabeth's very important criticism of Descartes's substance dualism from her *Correspondence* with Descartes and compare Descartes's and Spinoza's conception of a human being. Topics that we cover in the second unit include Locke's arguments against innate ideas and principles, and Leibniz's critical response to Locke, which leads to a discussion whether Leibniz is right to think that necessary truths such as mathematical

⁴ The IF-AT cards can be ordered from <http://www.epsteineducation.com/home/>.

truths cannot be established within Locke's framework. Locke's account of personal identity was a matter of controversial debate soon after its publications and to facilitate students' understanding of these debates we look at Locke's *Correspondence* with his friend William Molyneux, who rejects the implication of Locke's theory that someone who got drunk may not be responsible for crimes committed while drunk. We also discuss Leibniz's critical response to Locke's theory and selections from Catharine Trotter Cockburn's *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding*. Cockburn offers important arguments of her own to defend Locke's views against criticisms by Thomas Burnet. This approach enables me to bring to light that the thinkers whose works we read were part of complex scholarly networks, that they exchanged many letters with other intellectuals in Europe and beyond,⁵ and that their works inspired critical discussion and publications of critical remarks and defences.

Re (2): Team-Based Learning enables me to recreate the collaborative aspects that shaped the history of early modern philosophy within the classroom and to create a collaborative environment in the classroom. I believe that being aware that the texts that we discuss were controversial at the time of their publications increases the willingness of my students to take different viewpoints within their teams seriously. The teams are often asked to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the different positions and to decide where they position themselves with regard to the debates.

To create additional opportunities to engage critically with the historical debates (and to practice philosophical skills, as I explain below) I ask my students to write letters at the end of each of the first three units on a given topic.

Re (3): Successful teaching in a TBL classroom depends on **effective task design**. I want all my students to engage with the material and to learn from each other's different perspectives. To achieve this goal I often use the 4S task design model.⁶ 4S tasks have the following features:

- All students think about the **same** problem.
- The problem has to be **significant**.
- All students/teams have to make a **specific** choice.
- All students/teams have to **simultaneously report** their answers.

The tasks can be multiple-choice questions, questions with yes/no answer options, matching tasks, ranking exercises, one-word or one-sentence answers etc. 4S tasks make it possible to focus the discussion on a set of important answer options, but also create the space for students to reflect critically on alternative answer options or ways of improving the answers. I often ask students to write down their individual answers first. Then they have a discussion within their teams and select a team answer, which all teams will report simultaneously either by showing answer cards or by writing their answers on the board. The rationale for asking students to write down individual answers before they begin discussions with their team members is that it helps to involve *all* students in team

⁵ The project *Mapping the Republic of Letters* at Stanford University provides fascinating resources that map the exchanges of letters. For further details see <http://republicofletters.stanford.edu>.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion see Bill Roberson and Billie Franchini, "Effective Task-Design in the TBL Classroom"; Kimberly Van Orman, "Teaching Philosophy with Team-Based Learning".

discussions. While students make their choice, they have to think critically about their *reasons* for preferring one option over others. I emphasise that it is important that they can support their choice by reasons; thereby they practise a very important philosophical skill.

Re (4): I designed the course in such a way that it creates continuous opportunities for learning from peers and for practising philosophical skills. I included the following formative assessments in addition to a regular mid-term essay and a final take-home exam:

- Readiness Assurance Tests at the beginning of each unit
 - Ensure that students are familiar with important concepts and views that we will cover in more depth during the rest of the unit
- Letters to relevant thinkers at the end of each of the first three units
 - Provide an opportunity to practise how to write a strong critical evaluation and to learn from peer assessment.
 - The letter format prompts students to engage more charitably with the relevant views.

I design regular in-class activities such as 4S tasks that aim to practise philosophical skills such as the following:

- Argument analysis
 - Rank the premises and conclusion in correct order (and consider whether one or more premise(s) are missing).
- Critical evaluation of arguments, objections and responses
 - Rank the following objections according to their plausibility
 - Match objections and responses [the aim is to practise that a strong response engages directly with the objection].
- Assessing multiple possible interpretations of a passage

Re (5): In a TBL classroom students acquire important social skills for life. Through regular peer evaluations they learn to provide constructive feedback and they take responsibility for improving and shaping their learning environment.