

## Student Centered Discussions of the Nature of Art

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Students who are new to college frequently are also new to philosophy. One question for instructors who teach first-year students is this: How can we introduce them to philosophy in a way that actively engages them in philosophical thinking? Though an instructor might attempt to do this by engaging students in discussion, how might one design an entire course so that it satisfies this goal? In large part this last question motivated the design of a first-year seminar I offered in Fall 2009 and 2010 at Hollins University, a small liberal arts college for women. I taught this course using a unique collaborative student-centered discussion process designed to enhance students' practice of philosophical thinking. The students formed groups in which they conducted their own discussions to devise several possible responses to the question "what is art?" The students bore responsibility for generating answers to the central question of the course, putting them in a position to actively practice philosophy. In this paper I will describe the course, its structure, and outcomes I observed.

A common method for engaging students in philosophical thinking is to introduce philosophy through the work of historical or contemporary philosophers. To some extent this approach actively engages the students. A student reading Plato, Nietzsche or Nussbaum, may come to think more like a philosopher, asking the kinds of questions philosophers ask, and approaching answers in the same way philosophers have. We might call this the "philosophical exemplar" approach. One observes someone

else frame questions, make distinctions, uncover underlying assumptions, identify premises, draw conclusions, raise objections, answer them, and more. It is up to the student to learn to practice philosophy in that way. This works well for some students, but for most it does not instill philosophical skill in the students. This is particularly the case when students' learning is assessed by a comprehensive exam, or a paper which requires them to explain the material covered in class. Students who simply take exams and write papers have an incentive to mimic the content in the text or delivered by the instructor, but are not given incentives to practice thinking philosophically. The crude distinction here is between seeing philosophy done and doing philosophy oneself. In a classroom like this the instructor tells students about the material, but the students do not always actively engage in the philosophical enterprise.<sup>i</sup>

I took a different approach. I started with the assumptions that philosophy begins with a question, and philosophical engagement arises when one pursues the question. The course began with a basic question in the philosophy of art – “what is art?” Rather than teaching the history of responses to that question, I decided to pose it to the students and let them struggle with responding to it, not merely for one class meeting, but over an entire semester. My goal was to teach the students to *practice* philosophy, not merely to see it practiced by me or other professional philosophers. The core of the approach was a student-centered discussion model, adapted from a discussion process developed by the non-profit Interactivity Foundation.<sup>ii</sup> This model has some features in common with other collaborative learning approaches, but also some distinctive features that lend themselves well to teaching philosophy. I will begin by mentioning some advantages of using collaborative learning in general, then move on to discuss what is distinctive about the approach I used for the course. I will explain some of my broad pedagogical goals, some of the mechanics of the course, challenges it

presented, and the outcomes for the students. I will end with some suggestions as to how to implement this approach for other philosophy courses.

### **Pedagogical Goals**

The course was offered as a first-year seminar, so the students were all new to college. For this reason, I kept some of the goals quite simple. Students would learn how to explore a basic philosophical question, come to appreciate that a range of possible responses to the question are available, understand the implications of adopting each of these responses, and eventually come to choose one response and be prepared to justify her choice with evidence in support of it. In addition, I attempted to illustrate that intelligent, thoughtful disagreement is possible, and that difficult philosophical questions are usually not resolved to everyone's mutual satisfaction. I developed the last goal in response to a common refrain from students new to philosophy – “but what's the right answer?” In a very central way, I designed the course to emphasize that there are many plausible, distinct answers to philosophical questions. Much of the new material I present here was designed to require the students to generate multiple distinct responses to the core philosophical question.

Requiring the students to develop multiple responses was intentional. If the students settled on only one theory of art, or one response to the main question, they would cease to generate new ideas. Requiring multiple distinct responses fosters exploration and development of divergent ways of understanding the topic. To allow for multiple responses, I required the students to refrain from critiquing their own responses at the outset, so that nascent responses would have time to develop. If each idea the students generated was immediately subjected to criticism, few ideas would survive for long. Instead, putting criticism aside made space for creative development of what became more fully

realized theories of art. In effect, I asked the students to segregate two stages of theory development – generating ideas from subjecting those ideas to criticism.

### **Advantages of Collaborative Learning**

The approach I took falls broadly under the umbrella of collaborative learning, with several important distinguishing features. In general, the potential benefits of collaborative learning models in higher education are well-researched.<sup>iii</sup> I will mention a few advantages such approaches have for philosophy.<sup>iv</sup> One of the challenges for the beginning philosophy student is piecing together the details of what they learn and figuring how it connects to the main philosophical question at hand. Often the big questions are the ones that provoke student interest, questions such as “what kind of thing is a person?” or “what is knowledge and how do we acquire it?”. What becomes difficult is delving into detailed passages by philosophers and finding the path back to the main question, or indeed making connections amongst different sections of a work. In a traditional lecture format, the instructor explains these paths, and some students follow well enough. Comprehension and retention are both improved, however, if the student actively works through or even discovers the connections, instead of being led to them by the instructor. A collaborative learning environment that puts the students in the center of the discussion can achieve this.

A second advantage of collaborative learning environments for philosophy classrooms is the opportunity they provide for practicing philosophical discourse through peer-to-peer discussions. In a traditional lecture/discussion format, dialogue is generally reserved for interactions between the instructor and one or more students. The instructor is the acknowledged authority on the topic at hand, and in the end the instructor assesses how much the students have learned, usually by assigning a grade. This is not how philosophical discourse is handled amongst philosophers, of course. A

philosophical discussion proceeds with questions, proposed solutions, objections, replies, and on and on, but the participants are peers, even if one might be more well-read or have more detailed knowledge of the topic than others. If students only engage in dialogue with the instructor, and not with each other, they don't have the opportunity to practice philosophical discourse with peers. Some students come to the classroom already comfortable with sharing their views, even when they are contrary to what someone else expresses, including what the instructor says. Others overcome the reticence they feel at disagreeing with the person who will be grading them, and learn to express themselves from a class taught in the lecture style. But too many students simply learn to follow what the authority in the room says and work to maintain a good grade in the course. So a collaborative model supplies a means by which students can engage in philosophical discourse with peers and practice doing philosophy without unduly deferring to authority. This environment allows the students to pursue enlightenment, in Kant's sense. Without direction from an authority in the room, students can develop intellectual maturity, thinking for themselves. To make this possible, of course, a collaborative project must be designed with this purpose in mind.

Finally, collaborative learning can help students learn to constructively disagree. Researchers stress that good collaborative learning environments are ones that are positively interdependent.<sup>v</sup> This means that the group succeeds together, as a unit, and each member is accountable for his or her part of the work of the group. Successful collaborative groups have members who are responsible for not only their individual success, but each others' success. This encourages constructive, instead of destructive, conflict. When conflict arises, group members know that in the end, resolution will benefit the whole group. Contrast this with a traditional lecture/discussion format – if two students take opposing sides in a debate, neither has a reason to see things from the other's perspective. They can remain in competition with each other, since there is no structure that encourages cooperation. So

collaborative learning environments can help promote acceptance of diverse and mutually incompatible perspectives among thoughtful, intelligent people. This more accurately models the philosophical landscape, which is rich with diverse points of view, rather than one settled answer to each philosophical question. In a discussion about normative ethics, for example, students can appreciate that there are act-utilitarians, rule-utilitarians, Kantians, and virtue theorists, just to name a few. Each view has its supporters, each has theoretical and practical implications, some of which are intuitive, some counterintuitive. A classroom that promotes multiple perspectives prepares students to think constructively about different positions. This differs from a classroom that models philosophical disagreement as a zero-sum game in which one party is right and all others are wrong. Even if one thinks that, in the end, only one view can be correct, rarely are matters of philosophical import decisively settled, so students learning philosophy in an environment that reflects this are at an advantage.

### **Distinctive Features of the Present Approach**

The approach I used enhances common collaborative learning models in several ways.<sup>vi</sup> First, the discussions are designed to take place in what can be called a *sanctuary* environment in which students feel safe to express themselves. The sanctuary environment promotes original thought by eliminating three barriers: the burden of social approval, the pressure of time limits and the reliance on past answers. In group discussions, student ideas are not attributed to individuals, but instead to the group as a whole. If a group member contributes to the discussion, her name is not recorded anywhere as the author of that contribution. This way the students treat anything produced by a member of the group as the product of the whole group. The way the discussions are recorded reinforces this, as the ideas are written without any personal attribution, freeing individual students from feeling the need to defend their ideas or take ownership of them. This also defuses the influence

of a strong personality dominating group discussion with her point of view. Discussions also may extend beyond a single class meeting by carrying over to subsequent meetings, so that groups are not under the pressure of finishing all their discussion after 60 or 90 minutes.<sup>vii</sup> Finally, readings assigned prior to discussion are chosen to provoke discussion, not end it, so the readings generally raise questions, leaving the answers open to the students.<sup>viii</sup> This gives students the opportunity to produce fresh ideas, rather than feel obliged to repeat what they have read.

Before the group begins any substantive discussion, they collectively agree to a set of ground rules about how they will conduct their discussions. The rules each group adopts generally consist of expectations to listen, respect others, not interrupt, and generally treat each other well. But the rules also cover attendance, setting deadlines, how to communicate with each other outside the classroom, limitations on technology use in discussions, and more. While each group experiences transgressions throughout the course of a semester, reviewing the rules periodically helps to minimize this

Another core element was to practice what is called a “yes...and” approach in theatre improvisation circles. When one participant in a discussion shares an idea, others say “yes” to the idea, and add something to it, or contribute their own idea. This might seem antithetical to a discipline that praises one’s ability to dismantle an argument, but the approach has several important advantages. First, it reinforces the sanctuary model, allowing participants to freely express themselves without fear of being criticized. Second, it helps uncover underlying assumptions, since ideas that are too quickly dismissed as not worthwhile sometimes reveal what other, more conventional ideas take for granted. Third, it helps avoid the phenomenon known as “groupthink.” Sometimes in a group discussion, the views expressed by the most forceful or charismatic personality in the group become the views of the entire group. Some groups tend towards building consensus, which ends the discussion prematurely, since the group feels that once consensus has been reached, their job of exploration or idea generation

is finished. The practice of creative agreement, of saying “yes...and,” encourages a group to continue looking for and developing new possibilities and alternative perspectives. Most importantly, the “yes...and” approach allows the group to consider a range of possible responses to a question, separating the task of idea generation from the task of critically assessing the value of those ideas. Leaving ideas on the table longer does no harm, and in fact, an idea with little value generally will be dropped by the entire group sooner or later, as each member comes to see that it isn’t needed.<sup>ix</sup> The students were still required to critically analyze their responses, but they did so individually by writing analysis papers in which they had to defend one response, critique others, and address objections. This allowed the group discussion to be more generative, while preserving the need to practice critical analysis.<sup>x</sup>

### **Student Facilitators**

Some collaborative learning models leave the roles of each group member up to the group<sup>xi</sup>, while others suggest allowing group members to choose particular roles, such as recorder, timekeeper, facilitator or reporter.<sup>xii</sup> While roles might naturally arise in any group, intentionally paying attention to the process of the discussion and group interactions improves group communication. Furthermore, the special features of the present approach are best implemented by a facilitator. For these reasons, I required students to facilitate their own discussions, and I spent time teaching them how to do this.<sup>xiii</sup> Group discussions, especially when students direct the discussion, can be messy affairs. Some will be unclear as to what they are doing, others will talk over one another, there will be lulls in conversation, off-topic comments, and various distractions. Assigning a facilitator in the group puts one person in charge of the discussion *process*, without giving that person any authority over the *content*. The facilitator maintains the sanctuary environment, reminds participants of the agreed upon rules, fosters the practice of creative agreement (encouraging “yes...and” responses), encourages broad and roughly



balanced participation among the group members, prompts members to expand their thinking, defuses conflict that might turn destructive, and helps the group manage its time. For each class session, the groups have a distinct task to complete, and the facilitator helps ensure the group completes it. The facilitator does not simply passively record what the group says, nor does the facilitator lead the group to a conclusion. Instead, the facilitator pays attention to the group's own direction and momentum, and provides a broad process within which the group can develop its ideas. The facilitators also produce discussion summaries, consulting with a group note taker for that discussion, and share those summaries with the rest of the group to review before their next discussion. In my course, group members took turns facilitating, and each student facilitated at least two discussions, meeting with me for feedback and suggestions between the two facilitations.

### **Course Mechanics**

As one of several introductory first-year seminars, the course was subject to enrollment caps, so the class consisted of 12 or 13 students each semester. It is common among collaborative learning models to recommend that groups be as small as possible.<sup>xiv</sup> In this case, however, I divided the class into two groups. The main reason for this is that with one student as facilitator, the remaining five or six members were responsible for the content of the discussion. One of the five was charged with taking discussion notes as well, limiting that person's opportunities to contribute ideas. The note taker and facilitator jobs rotated among members with each discussion session. Given class size, three groups would have been too small. Though attendance was better than the average first year course, occasional absences make group discussions difficult when a group has only several participants. During group discussions, I seated myself between the groups, taking notes on each facilitator's performance

for later feedback. Especially in the beginning, I served as a resource when a group or a facilitator was floundering or needed clarification. As the semester progressed, the groups needed my input less frequently.

The class met twice a week, and one day each week was devoted to student centered group discussion, while the other day was reserved for instructor-facilitated class discussion. I facilitated discussions that focused on assigned readings. Many of the readings involved case studies that raised questions about the nature of art. The other purpose of these full class discussions was to model facilitation techniques for the students, so they could employ them as they learned to facilitate their own discussions<sup>xv</sup>.

The overall goal for each group was to complete a report, explaining in detail five to seven divergent philosophical conceptions of the nature of art by the end of the semester. I constructed a template for the report, outlining its main components. Each response needed to be explained fully, with examples provided of works that it includes in the category of artworks, and works it excludes. Further implications of the view had to be discussed, as well as a minimum of two objections, with replies. In some circumstances, such as when the response did not provide a positive characterization of art, some of these components were waived. For example, one group decided that the term “art” is not definable, so their response to the question “what is art?” did not divide works into artworks and non-artworks. I planned the series of discussions to enable the groups to successfully complete the report.

Before group discussions about the nature of art commenced, I did two things. First, each group decided collectively on the rules which they would follow in conducting their discussions. Second, before the first group discussion about art, I asked the entire class to brainstorm different kinds of art, either by type or by genre. The list included expected kinds, such as painting, sculpture, and music, but

it also included less traditional forms, such as video games, fashion and comics. Once the students were satisfied with the list, they voted to select seven items which would focus their discussions.<sup>xvi</sup> For example, one semester the class settled on music, comics, fashion, film, painting, sculpture and dance. I asked each student to complete an independent research project in which she needed to find a controversial work that raised debate about whether the work can be classified as art, then write a summary explaining the work and why some would call it art, and others not. Both of these initial activities helped structure the ensuing discussions.

The groups set their own facilitation and note taking order in the beginning of the semester. I randomly assigned class sessions from the list of seven types of art the class had selected. Each facilitator had to prepare for a group discussion by taking the type of art (e.g. fashion) assigned to her, and craft questions and collect materials to provoke discussion. I consulted with facilitators ahead of time to help them frame some questions for discussion. Some of the relevant broad questions included “what is fashion?”, “what distinguishes fashion from other dress?”, “Is some fashion art?”, “Is some fashion not art?”, “If some fashion is not art and some is, how can we explain that difference?” The facilitator provided images, video, sound clips or other media as samples to prompt discussion.<sup>xvii</sup>

The goal for each of these individual discussions was to produce a set of possible responses to the question “what makes \_\_\_\_ art?” The groups conducted discussions for each of the types of art the class selected. I provided some outside reading for each discussion, focusing on aspects of the kind of art to be discussed. The groups were told explicitly not to devise a single answer to the question. So the group was instructed to avoid consensus, instead striving to multiply the number of responses, and facilitators were told to encourage divergent opinions. The discussion then proceeded in stages. First, the group considered the questions they thought best to ask themselves, and prioritized them if necessary. They began generating responses to those questions, organized their responses, combining

some that were similar or revising others to bring better clarity and segregate the responses.<sup>xviii</sup>

Though they did not critique the responses, some amendments or qualifications were allowed. The purpose here was to allow the students to explore possible responses prior to developing reasons to select one over another. In a limited way they were allowed to take steps toward critique at this stage, however. Part of the discussion explored the consequences of adopting one response instead of another, as long as the consequences were not considered reasons to adopt or reject the response. For example, in a discussion of fashion, one response maintained that fashion is original dress promoted by stylish and influential tastemakers such as professional fashion designers, models and certain celebrities. One consequence the group considered is that ordinary people, such as the students themselves, do not wear fashion, unless they purchase it from designers or steal it from the right celebrities. While this might be deemed a reason to reject the view by some, the group was instructed to retain the response, even if it has this consequence.

The students also facilitated discussions that began with their research into controversial works. Each student shared with her group the work she discovered in her research, and the group discussed reasons to consider it art, and reasons to deny it being art. Doing this gave the students a sense of ownership of the inquiry – each facilitator had a commitment to asking the questions she posed to the group. Similarly, by choosing to focus individual discussions on types of art chosen by the class, the discussions were designed to respond to their interest, while at the same time achieving the pedagogical goals for the course.

A final note about mechanics: facilitators stood in front of flipcharts, and noted main ideas or concepts in marker on the flipcharts, then posted each page on the wall of the classroom as they went. This provided the group with a visual representation of their discussion, as it was going on, and it gave the facilitator a way to reach back to other points in the discussion and tie ideas together or frame

questions in fresh ways. The facilitators took the flipchart pages home with them and produced summaries of the discussions, which were posted online for the group to review. In later discussions, the group began synthesizing the ideas they had produced earlier and broadened the responses to include all kinds of art. The summaries and flipchart pages were valuable tools to help them do this large task. Other materials could be employed for these purposes, such as Smartboard technology, but chalkboards or whiteboards are not portable and get erased, and smaller pages wouldn't give the students a visual map of the arc of their discussion. The discussion notes also reinforced the idea that the discussion was ongoing, cumulative, collective work, not bounded by an individual class session. Not surprisingly, more than one student commented that they began to think of the pages themselves, covered in multicolored marker scrawl, as works of art.

## **Results**

There were some distinct advantages to the approach I describe here, and some challenges. The first time teaching the course, I engaged in a fair amount of error correction as the course progressed, but the second time went more smoothly, as one might expect.

First, the students experienced doing the work of philosophical inquiry, rather than being told how it is done. Most experienced significant discomfort at first, since this was a novel activity full of ambiguity and requiring more active cognitive initiative than many typical classroom tasks. I took their discomfort as a good sign, since it was evidence that they understood that their task did not involve the familiar routine to which they were accustomed. Several emerged as leaders early in the discussions, encouraging their peers to work together. Learning facilitation ended up being a highlight for many students, and an important component of learning philosophy. One skill the facilitators have to master

is active listening, to grasp and rephrase others' ideas. The facilitators also had to figure out how to ask good questions that would provoke insights relevant to the task of that day's discussions. Any good philosophical inquiry must begin with asking a good question, and facilitating provided practice. Facilitators also learned to practice a type of Socratic ignorance – exploring the ways that “not knowing” can be more valuable than “knowing” when it comes to encouraging broad inquiry into a philosophical topic. This is another way in which the facilitator learned to enable the group to explore the topic, rather than lead them to a predetermined result. Too much knowledge about a subject can hamper the questioner's ability to facilitate a broad exploration of the topic, particularly if the questions presuppose significant background knowledge. Approaching facilitating with a beginner's mind was useful for the students, since it allowed them to begin with very basic, but important, questions. It also meant that facilitators could ask foundational questions that helped the group uncover assumptions. As a result, some of the less self-assured students, who might be lower-achieving in a conventional course, took to facilitating quite well. One of the ordinarily lower-achieving students volunteered to facilitate a short discussion with a large group of her peers, which consisted of most of the members of the first-year class, and did so successfully with nearly 200 in attendance.

One of my concerns before attempting this course was that the content generated by the student teams would be less sophisticated, less rigorous and less enlightening than what I could teach them from philosophical texts and lectures. Not surprisingly, that was true in some respects, but not to the degree that I feared. By themselves, the students discovered and discussed many concepts that arise in the field of aesthetics, without those concepts being introduced to them: intention, beauty, expression, creativity, originality and taste all cropped up repeatedly. Every group also came to the conclusion that there is no single definitive answer to the question “What is art?” – art cannot be circumscribed or defined in any final way. While their conclusions and arguments might have lacked the

sophistication and complexity of a text written by a professional philosopher, their discovery provided me the opportunity to share some of those texts with them, so that they could see that their conclusions were similar to what others have concluded. When they concluded that “art” can’t be defined, I shared Morris Weitz’s seminal article “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”.<sup>xix</sup> After they deliberated about whether deciding on aesthetic value is just a matter of taste, I assigned David Hume. This way, they generated the ideas, and I could respond by sharing philosophical works that would enhance their thinking, or give them an opportunity to respond to other positions. It also provided an opportunity to illustrate how to test the implications of a theory and how to critique it. When they studied George Dickie’s Institutional Theory of art, they not only considered how it answers the question “What is art?”, but also looked at some of the theory’s consequences, and learned how critical arguments can be constructed that call the theory into question.

Sometimes the reading assignments had unexpected effects. Some students erroneously took the additional readings as authoritative sources, thinking that I was asking them to mimic these thinkers. One, after reading Weitz, asked me why we should go on asking what art is when “the book has already given us the answer.” While unnerved at first, I realized that had I straightforwardly assigned these readings, lectured, then tested the class, I would not have known that her attitude was that the course readings served as the final authorities on our course topics. Conducting the class in the way that I did revealed this attitude, and I was able to respond by helping her critically evaluate everything, even the text she assumed was authoritative.<sup>xx</sup>

Based on informal conversations outside the classroom, the students also seemed to retain what they learned better than they do from a traditional Philosophy of Art class. In this course I found that 12 months after the course was over, even students whose academic performance is generally average or below could recall details of their discussions about artistic intention, for example. When I

approached three students who had taken a more traditional Philosophy of Art course from me, their recollection of what they learned was far cloudier.

Some challenges resulted from using this student-centered, facilitated discussion approach with first-year students. Some students have preconceived notions about what a college classroom will look like, and had a hard time adjusting to different expectations. Others struggled with the fact that the content of the discussions was up to them, instead of being told precisely what to think. Students who are more mature and independent have an advantage when working in student-centered groups. I implemented parts of the model with an upper-division class, consisting of juniors and seniors only, half of whom were philosophy majors. For that group, being critical of a text and producing one's own responses was not an issue. The challenge with a more advanced group was just the opposite. Experienced students, especially philosophy majors, acted less like facilitators and more like lecturers – they felt compelled to share their knowledge, rather than ask questions to provoke others' thinking. In some ways this was harder to manage, but the advanced students learned how to facilitate well.<sup>xxi</sup>

My goal in the first-year seminar course was not to replace an existing introductory course in the philosophy of art, but instead attempt to create a course that puts students, and student interest, as the motivating force behind inquiry. This required a collaborative approach, which created opportunities for students to practice communication, social and intellectual skills they would not employ in a more passive learning environment. At the same time, I demanded that the quality of student learning be at least as good, but hopefully better, than a traditional course. I found that the final group reports were sometimes confused, discussions of responses missed some crucial points, and different responses overlapped significantly at times.<sup>xxii</sup> Still, I liken the result to sending a child to an art teacher. If the teacher holds the child's hand while she paints, the resulting painting might be excellent, but it tells you little about how well the child paints. If the painting is wholly the work of the child's, the painting might



be messier, but the good parts are evidence of the child's skill at painting. I found that the resulting product gave me a clear picture of what the students had learned along the way. In terms of skill acquisition the gains from independent practice are incomparable.

### **A Note on Assessment**

Since the course was organized in a nontraditional manner, assessing student learning was also nontraditional. Though the students had to write an analysis paper, a group report and several summaries, much of what I assessed was their group discussion process and the facilitator's performance. For the facilitators, I used an evaluation form (see Appendix A) that covers various aspects of facilitation skills: active listening, stimulating original thought, managing the flow of discussion, maintaining eye contact, keeping the discussion focused, maintaining balance among participants, and more. The student received a baseline grade for her first facilitation, with feedback about how to improve. Then after the second facilitation, she received a grade based upon her degree of improvement.

Assessing the performance of the group discussions was less formal. Initially I spoke with each group after a discussion meeting, letting them know how well or poorly they were completing the task. Over time, I shared with them a provisional grade as well, which I recorded for every member of the group. As the group improved in accomplishing its goals for discussion, their grade improved. I learned that feedback in terms of a grade was very desirable for the students, and they were less comfortable if they felt unclear about how well or poorly they were doing. But the grade was always combined with feedback about how to improve, and the final grade for discussions was based on improvement over time, with every student in a group receiving the same grade.

## Further Applications

While my course focused on “What is art?”, courses could be developed around any number of other broad philosophical questions. The purpose behind running a course this way is to maximize student investment in the topic and enhance skill development, while not sacrificing quality of learned content. A course in epistemology could proceed with the broad question of “what can we know?”, a course in ethics could begin with “what do we owe others?” or “what might be a right action in a given circumstance, and if so, how do we determine what it is?” There are many possibilities for implementing this kind of facilitated student-centered discussion model in a philosophy classroom, and I have found it a valuable way to approach collaborative learning. The approach here is well-suited to any topic where there is room to explore alternative possible approaches to the subject matter, and that covers any significant philosophical topic, and many topics outside philosophy besides.

At the end of the Fall 2010 semester, I asked the class to create a presentation to share what they learned in the course with students from all the first-year seminars. After spending the semester working collaboratively, they naturally followed a collaborative process to devise, plan and complete their presentation. They made a film in which they interviewed many people around campus, from students at dinner to custodial staff to the President of the University, asking each person the question they had wrestled with: “What is art?” After the brief film, they asked the audience the same question, facilitating a short discussion on the topic, then they shared a selection of theories their groups had constructed comparing them to theories they had learned from philosophical texts. What was most notable was how engaged, active and collaborative the students were. Besides periodically asking whether they were making progress on the project, I did not intervene, and they were able to explain clearly what they had learned to a general audience. In short, they showed that they had actively engaged in philosophy.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## APPENDIX A: Facilitation Evaluation - Instructor

The Instructor Evaluation Form is filled out by the instructor while a student facilitates a group discussion. The student then completes a self-evaluation form (see below). The instructor meets with the student subsequently, and shares comments at that time, comparing the student's self-assessment with the instructor's assessment.

Facilitation Evaluation:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Setting the tone for the discussion
2. keeping the discussion focused
3. managing and sustaining the flow
4. providing the proper level of discussion engagement, playing the proper role of facilitator
5. stimulating original ideas
6. maintaining the discussion at the right level
7. handling discussion challenges, including participation
8. attending to the non-verbal side of facilitation

Overall Comments:

APPENDIX B: Student Self-Evaluation Form

Facilitator Self-Assessment

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Rate yourself on your abilities as a facilitator using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
very low	low	average	high	very high

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I remained focused on the issue at hand.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I maintain eye contact with participants.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I repeated what has been said (paraphrase) and paused conversation to allow the notetaker or myself to capture ideas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I asked for clarification when I didn't understand or when the individual had not communicated her ideas clearly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I kept an eye on the clock and managed the process of the discussion to meet our goals.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I let the speaker finish before I interjected.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I waited until everyone contributed before I offered my opinions and ideas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I thanked people for their ideas and encouraged them to contribute.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I make sure everyone participated

- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I discouraged certain individuals from dominating the discussion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I encouraged the group to look at the problem from different angles.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I helped develop 'half-baked' ideas by encouraging the group to explore the possibilities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I effectively handled disruptive behavior.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I kept the discussion flowing

Improvements I want to make for next time:

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<sup>i</sup> This is particularly true in a course organized in the traditional lecture style. Many instructors use a modified lecture/discussion format, which increases the opportunity for active learning, but often gives plenty of students the option to passively listen.

<sup>ii</sup> The Interactivity Foundation is a private, non-partisan, non-profit foundation whose core mission is to improve the quality and quantity of public discussions that shape public policy options. One of the Foundation's activities is collaboration with college faculty, and I participated in their 2009 Summer Institute, held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The approach I discuss grew from what I learned at the Institute. For more information see their website at <http://www.interactivityfoundation.org/>.

<sup>iii</sup> cf. the first chapter of Barkley, Cross & Major, Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty (Wiley: San Francisco, 2005), pp. 3-25. They distinguish between collaborative and cooperative learning, and though the model I present here contains elements of both, I will continue to use "collaborative", rather than introduce a third term.

<sup>iv</sup> For another classroom dialogue model that contains some features similar to the one I present here, see Maughn Rollins Gregory's "A Framework for Facilitating Classroom Dialogue", *Teaching Philosophy* (30: 1, March 2007, pp. 59-84). Gregory points out several benefits of his framework for philosophy classrooms that also apply to the model I present here. His framework, however, is explicitly pragmatist, and aims at developing group consensus around one answer. The framework I am sharing explicitly avoids consensus, targeting the development of divergent or contrasting understandings.

<sup>v</sup> See Barkley, Cross & Major (2005), p. 9, Cooper, et al. Cooperative Learning and College Instruction (California State University Foundation: Long Beach, CA, 1990), p. 7, and Johnson, Johnson & Smith, Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom (Interaction: Edina, MN, 1998), p 1:20.

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<sup>vi</sup> Details about these features can be found in *Guidebook for Student-Centered Classroom Discussions*, Jack Byrd, Jr., ed. Suzanne Goodney Lea (Interactivity Foundation, 2008). Additionally, the Interactivity Foundation has a Student Guide Wiki that contains many resources for students who are learning to facilitate discussions in college classrooms. See <http://studentguide.interactivityfoundationwiki.wikispaces.net/home>.

<sup>vii</sup> That being said, each group had to meet the final outcome in the course, and every group was expected to make progress in each class meeting. Groups were free, however, to return to earlier themes and come back to topics later which they realized they had not fully discussed, so there was a degree of fluidity to group discussions.

<sup>viii</sup> One useful resource for discussion-provoking readings in my course was [Puzzles About Art: An Aesthetics Casebook](#), ed. Battin, Fisher, Moore and Silvers (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1989).

<sup>ix</sup> Commonly, I found that groups would take some of the ideas that they found less worthwhile, and fold them in with others they deemed more valuable. For example, a group was considering the view that all artworks are human artifacts, and someone suggested that digital photographs would not be art, since they are too heavily dependent on technology. Rather than someone critiquing this claim, the group accepted it, and eventually, it was amended by the student who first offered it. She decided instead that humans can create artifacts by using tools, including technology, but there might be limits on how much of the product is out of the human being's control.

<sup>x</sup> Malcolm Gladwell describes the "yes...and" approach in chapter four of [Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking](#) (Little, Brown: New York, 2005), pp. 114-117. He calls it "creating the conditions for successful spontaneity" (117), and it applies to philosophical discussion, as well as to improvisational performance. Students are free to think more creatively, and ideas that are not worth saving are eventually abandoned anyway.

<sup>xi</sup> For example, see Cooper, et al. (1990), pp. 11-14.

<sup>xii</sup> Barkley, Cross & Major (2005), p. 52.

<sup>xiii</sup> Gregory (2007) explicitly identifies the teacher as the facilitator, though he says that over time, the group will hopefully move towards collectively facilitating itself, which he deems an ideal. This highlights a difference in how each of these models conceives of facilitation. In what I describe here, a facilitator is an essential element of the discussion process.

<sup>xiv</sup> For example, see Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1998), 2:5.

<sup>xv</sup> Many of the techniques I introduced are common techniques to facilitate productive discussion, such as think-pair-share, or round robin activities. Many were culled from [The Facilitation Guidebook](#), by Jack Byrd, Jr. and Adolf Gundersen (Interactivity Foundation, 2005). Students were supplied with copies of this guidebook to prepare themselves for facilitating discussions.

<sup>xvi</sup> I allowed them to choose seven because that was the size of the largest group. That gives each student an opportunity to facilitate a discussion on one of the types.

<sup>xvii</sup> Facilitators were instructed to keep any clips brief, and to use them at the beginning to prompt discussion, then focus on discussion. Long video or sound clips distract the students from the task at hand.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Gregory has a six-stage framework for dialogic inquiry (Gregory 2007), and the discussions the groups conducted conformed roughly to the first three of those stages. Gregory has a chart summarizing these stages (Gregory 2007), 62.

<sup>xix</sup> *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956), 27-35.

<sup>xx</sup> In some cases, I provided the group with citations, since one of the goals of the class was to develop library and research skills. So students would have to find the article or book. The class also had a basic text, which contained summaries of some historically significant views in aesthetics, and I could assign readings from that text as needed.

<sup>xxi</sup> An important question that I have not yet attempted to answer is this: Does the student-centered approach I describe here prepare first-year students for more advanced work in philosophy, and if so, how? In the future I would like to track student outcomes to learn specifically whether skills practiced in this first-year seminar transfer to other courses, and whether early exposure to a student-centered approach correlates with various outcomes, such as persistence to graduation.

<sup>xxii</sup> Here it would be useful to compare the outcomes for students in this course with outcomes in a traditionally structured lecture and discussion course on the same topic. I have not taught a first-year seminar on this topic in any other way, so I don't have a straightforward way of making the comparison. What I can say is this: compared to the outcomes I see for traditionally taught introductory philosophy courses aimed at first year students, the students from this course had a greater appreciation and comprehension of diverse philosophical views. For some students this was bewildering, but most were able to better articulate divergent views.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Many thanks to the Interactivity Foundation for support not only in developing the course I describe here, but for assistance and feedback on this paper. Special thanks go to Jeff Prudhomme, Fellow of the Interactivity Foundation, whose comments improved the present work.