Evaluating the Impact of Engaged Philosophy in the Online Classroom: Lessons Learned

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As an Oregon State Ecampus Research Fellow, I designed and initiated a research study that aimed to: 1) investigate tools and techniques for engaged, experiential online learning with undergraduate philosophy students and 2) propose discipline-specific criteria for evaluating the impact of these pedagogical interventions. The study was designed to answer the following research question: Will an engaged, experiential learning intervention increase students' understanding of and interest in core course concepts? I hoped to test my hypothesis that online teaching and learning enhances philosophical education by creating unique and valuable opportunities for community engagement and experiential learning.

This hypothesis—based on my experience designing, teaching, and revising PHL 360: Philosophy and the Arts—runs counter to received disciplinary wisdom; because philosophical pedagogical practices rely heavily on real-time Socratic questioning and argument analysis, online courses are often considered to be a derivative replacement for on-campus courses. To prove otherwise, I would need a convincing evidence-based demonstration of the advantages of online learning and teaching. This paper will offer an experiential account of my project and address obstacles I faced as a philosopher, beginning research to evaluate the effectiveness of an online, experiential assignment.

Project Description

My original research proposal included two pilot projects; I planned to compare the results. The first component was an inter-institutional collaboration with philosophy colleagues at another university. Oregon State University (OSU) students in a hybrid section of PHL 150: Great Ideas in Philosophy would complete public philosophy assignments with students in my colleagues' "Engaged Philosophy" course. Due to the cancellation of my course during the scheduled collaboration, this first component was removed from the study. (See the "Recommendations" section for a discussion of this obstacle.)

The second pilot project, which has been running for two years, focused on a term-long interview assignment in an online section of PHL 360: Philosophy and the Arts. The course is taught once a year during the summer session with approximately fifteen students. Reading assignments cover standard survey material in the philosophy of art and music, including canonical figures such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Leo Tolstoy and contemporary scholars such as Jeanette Bicknell and John Drabinksi. (A copy of the syllabus, including a schedule of readings, may be viewed on the course's public website.) Unlike other sections of the course, my summer section of PHL 360 uses the rock band "Phish" as a case study. Students in the course—nicknamed the "Philosophy School of Phish"—complete several experiential learning assignments that concretize their theoretical readings.

The course's capstone project requires students to synthesize, apply, and translate course concepts and themes to a lay audience. With this "Artist Interview Project," students are paired with an artist from the Phish community. (Participants have included professional fan artists and even official artists who work for the band.) Over the course of an eight-week term, students interview their assigned artists and write blog posts analyzing their discussions.

The assignment includes eight components:

1. Submit Artist Preferences: Students review a list of artists available for interview and submit their top three preferences.
2. Contact Artist & Schedule Interview: Students contact artists to introduce themselves, schedule interviews, and determine interview format (e.g., phone, Skype, etc.).
3. Submit Background Research: Students research artists' background and work. Students summarize and report their findings to a group discussion within the course management system.

4. Draft Interview Questions: Students design 6-8 interview questions that implement specific concepts from assigned readings and submit for instructor approval.
5. Submit Interview Transcript: Students submit text, audio, or video transcripts of their interviews.
6. Draft Blog Post: Students submit a complete draft of their blog post.
7. Final Blog Post: After implementing the instructor's suggested edits, students submit a final blog post.
8. Self-Evaluation: Students submit a 1-2 page written evaluation of their blog posts. They are instructed to describe what they learned and to evaluate their blog posts according to the assignment rubric.

The study compares students' self-reported perceptions of interest in and performance on the Artist Interview Project to their actual performance on and engagement with the assignment. Two questionnaires are administered via Qualtrics: a pre-survey at the beginning of the course and a post-survey at the end of the course. Evaluation of the pre- and post- surveys will include quantitative and qualitative analysis of participant responses. Actual student performance will be determined through evaluation of submitted coursework, while self-reported perception is based on the Self-Evaluation component of the assignment.

Research Obstacles

With the exception of some recent developments in relatively new subfields such as Experimental Philosophy and Philosophy for Children, little philosophical research involves original empirical research. Professional training within the field of philosophy is typically limited to disciplinary methodologies such as textual analysis, argumentative writing, and critical thinking, as opposed to research study design and data collection. Consequently, "Evaluating the Impact of Engaged Philosophy in the Online Classroom" is my first solo adventure into projects of this nature. Due to a number of difficulties, the study is not yet complete. I will discuss three of them here: the IRB, consent process, and classroom logistics.

Obstacle #1: Misunderstandings about Institutional Review Board

An institutional review board (IRB) is a university committee that protects the rights and wellbeing of human research subjects recruited to participate in research. In order to uphold research ethics guidelines, the IRB reviews all research involving human subjects to approve, reject, or revise research activities in accordance with federal guidelines. Any scholarly activity that is a systematic investigation intended to produce generalizable knowledge, is subject to IRB oversight. There are three levels of IRB review: exempt review, expedited review, and full board review. As the risk to study participants increases, the level of review that is required becomes more extensive.

Within this context, it is clear that my study required IRB review; collecting student data counts as a systematic investigation, while dissemination of my results through publication contributes to generalizable knowledge. However, this fact was not apparent when I first conceptualized my project; I consistently received advice from colleagues in Philosophy that research evaluating classroom practices does not need IRB review, as long as I anonymized student data. Furthermore, this belief is reflected in the scholarly record. For example, my survey of *Teaching Philosophy*, the only journal focused on philosophical pedagogy, identified only seven articles since the journal's inception in 1975 addressing the issue of IRB review.

I attribute this misunderstanding to several factors. First, philosophers often conceptualize our methodology as "thinking about" a subject. We're accustomed to engaging in philosophical dialogue as a way of finding out what others, including our students, think. Thinking about and discussing philosophy is much less invasive that taking blood samples or putting students in fMRI machines, so the need for IRB review is less "visible." Next, as instructors, we regularly evaluate our teaching practices and make modifications based on our understanding of what works. In other words, it seems that we are always, to some extent, experimenting on our students. Third, as explained

by a number of my colleagues, standard educational practices are exempt from IRB review.

The first two misunderstandings miss the distinction between learning through experience and dialogue from generalizable knowledge. If research activities are designed or conducted for the purpose of generalizing to a broader population, IRB review is necessary. The third misunderstanding is more deceptive, because it is grounded in a partial truth. According to the IRB at my institution, "established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices"(Oregon State University, 2017) is one of the "exempt" categories according to federal regulations. The advice I received, however, mistakenly assumes that the exempt *type of review* means *excluded from* IRB requirements. However, that a study is exempt means associated activities must be subjected to the lowest level of IRB oversight, not that the exempt study is exempt from institutional requirements, laws, and ethical guidelines.

Obstacle #2: The Consent Process

Informed consent is a legal and ethical prerequisite for research on human subjects. The principle of respect for persons, as described in the Belmont Report, (The Belmont Report, 1978) requires that research subjects have access to the information necessary to make an informed decision regarding whether to participate in research and are given the opportunity to choose or refuse to do so. The consent process, which is required by the IRB, is designed to prevent coercion.

After resolving the misunderstandings about the IRB (#1), it became clear that I had to obtain informed consent from my students in order to proceed with my research project. The students must know what data I am collecting, understand how I intended to use that data for research, and formally agree to my use of their assignments and course analytics before I can include their data in my investigations. Knowing that I needed consent, however, did not inform me *how* to obtain it. Because I am collecting two different kinds of data, students must consent to both. Consent for two anonymous online questionnaires is obtained at the beginning of each survey within Qualtrics. The first two questions of the survey, which are required, establish that participating students are 1) over the age of 18 and 2) their own legal guardians. The third question, also required, asks the participant to give or decline consent. If any of these three questions are answered "no" or are unanswered, the participant will not be able to access the survey. A separate consent form requests consent to use course assignments and online analytics. This Qualtrics survey is controlled by a researcher from a unit outside the Philosophy Department, so that students' decisions to give or refuse consent are confidential until the completion of the course.

After the completion of the first course included in my study, I encountered this second obstacle; only three of fifteen students consented to my use of their data. As a scholar interested in my own project, I had assumed that students would be excited to contribute to research about effective pedagogical practices or, at least, sign up for the possibility of winning an Amazon.com gift card. My assumptions, unfortunately, turned out to be inaccurate. This was a difficult reality to digest, because it meant that my study would need to run through several iterations of the class before I will collect enough data to analyze for publication.

Obstacle #3: Classroom Logistics

As my study progressed, I also learned that the everyday realities of the classroom significantly impact the viability of a research study in the scholarship of teaching and learning. For example, when my PHL 150 course that was part of an inter-institutional collaboration was cancelled, the associated component of the study became untenable. It is also worth noting that differences in the institutions' academic calendars also created significant logistical difficulties; because OSU is on the quarter system, our term would have started several weeks after my colleagues' course. Additionally, once a study is running, how often a course is offered determines the rate at which data will be collected. Because my course is only offered once a year, I had to adjust my project timeline to include at least three or four years of data collection. Course enrollment will also determine the length of the study, as the number of students

enrolled each term will also directly affect data collection. Student drops and withdrawals midterm, even if they have given consent, could also slow the pace of data collection.

Conclusion: Some Recommendations

Traditional philosophical research is considerably more predictable than a quantitative and qualitative study about effective pedagogical interventions in an online classroom. I read, take notes, and write at a predictable pace. The amount of time I have for a given project can be approximated by reviewing my calendar and pending commitments. With hindsight, my assumption that I could complete my original research plan within a year seems naïve; course enrollments, schedules, and students introduce many variable factors, some of which are outside the PIs' control. These were lessons that I learned through experience. With the hopes of assisting other philosophers who would like to venture into this type of research, I have compiled a list of recommendations:

1. **Assume you'll need more time.** Pedagogical research can be unpredictable, so expect that you'll need flexibility in your project timeline. However long you think your study will take, double it (at least!).

2. **Seek out institutional resources**. While navigating your IRB for the first time may be daunting, you don't have to reinvent the wheel alone. Schedule a meeting with an IRB representative for a consultation, contact your campus research office for possible support, or ask an experienced colleague for advice. In my experience, reviewing a sample IRB protocol from a colleague provided me with a more concrete understanding of the review process.

3. **Review relevant scholarship of teaching and learning literature**. While there is very little research in philosophy about effective online instructional methods, there is significant work on this and related subjects in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Reviewing the results of published studies will help you develop a clear research question and provide examples of experimental designs that you can model or modify.

4. **Clarify and narrow your study's focus**. As I began the process of initiating my study, it quickly became apparent that my original research proposal included two distinct research projects. If you've proposed to compare two new teaching interventions, for example, consider if you should separate the projects. I was forced to narrow the scope of my study because my PHL 150 course was cancelled, but you might prefer to make more calculated decisions about how to proceed.

5. **Consider structural ways to encourage informed consent.** After the first iteration of my PHL 360 course concluded with only three students consenting to participate in my study, I consulted with OSU's Ecampus Research Unit and an instructional designer about how to improve consent rates in the future. Utilizing OSU's CMS, we organized the consent materials into its own module, which students had to complete before accessing the rest of the course at the beginning of the term. An ungraded quiz asks them if they have completed the consent document and offers an additional reminder. While students can still decline to participate, this structural edit in the course organization ensures that students open and review the consent documents.

With the help of these recommendations, my hope is that other philosophers will contribute to research on teaching and learning.

References

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About the Research Unit at Oregon State Ecampus

Vision

The Ecampus Research Unit supports Oregon State University's mission and vision by conducting world-class research on online education that develops knowledge, serves our students and contributes to the economic, social, cultural and environmental progress of Oregonians, as well as national and international communities of teachers and learners.

Mission

The Ecampus Research Unit (ECRU) makes research actionable through the creation of evidence-based resources related to effective online teaching, learning and program administration toward the fulfillment of the goals of Oregon State's mission. Specifically, the research unit conducts original research, creates and validates instruments, supports full-cycle assessment loops for internal programs, and provides resources to encourage faculty research and external grant applications related to online teaching and learning.

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Suggested Citation

Jenkins, S. (2018). Evaluating the impact of engaged Philosophy in the online classroom: Lessons learned. *White Paper*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Ecampus Research Unit.