Teaching Philosophy

FROM THE EDITORS

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We welcome readers to the spring 2018 issue of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*. In this issue we present three articles and our Letter from the Editors, which contains an announcement of some future plans for review articles within our pages.

Our first article, "Teaching Affirmative Action," by Steven Cahn, discusses problems involved in trying to have fruitful discussions concerning affirmative action in academia. Cahn cites some misunderstandings that derail constructive debate about the wisdom of instituting affirmative action policies and distinguishes between what he calls "procedural affirmative action" and "preferential affirmative action," each of which has different aims, and so regards the fulfillment of different criteria as important to success. In the course of his discussion, Cahn examines as justifying criteria for instituting affirmative action policies both the achievement of diversity and the redress of past wrongs. Additionally, since preferential affirmative action policies are intended to give preference to some groups or persons over others, Cahn calls attention to some of the different *forms* that "giving preference" may take: For example, should affirmative action candidates be given preference in terms of being *invited to be interviewed* over other, stronger, candidates, or should affirmative action candidates be given preference *in being hired* over other stronger candidates? Clearly, some forms of preference may be more justified than others in achieving the goal of a particular affirmative action policy.

In the end, Cahn does not offer an answer to the question of the wisdom and/or morality of academic affirmative action policies. Nor does he aim to provide an answer to this question. Rather, his aim is to clarify the issues at stake, and which should be taken into account, in deliberations about how to answer this question.

Our second article, "The Case for Discussion-Intensive Pedagogy," authored by John Capps, focuses on a pedagogic practice so common in philosophy classrooms that it might appear that nothing other than the obvious could be said about it. Capps proves this false: he makes interesting and illuminating points about the use of discussion not only generally but also when used in the specific context of philosophy instruction. He begins by taking up the question of what discussion *is*, noting some of the various definitions that have been offered by different writers on the subject and indicating the reasons he takes many of these definitions to fall short. He then goes on to explain, first, why discussion (appropriately defined) is uniquely suited to philosophical pedagogy, and second, why the advantages to students of having discussion play a large part in their philosophy classes go well beyond the philosophy classroom.

Capps distinguishes between discussion-based and discussion-intensive courses, the former regarding discussion as the primary form of pedagogy and therefore the dominant classroom activity, the latter regarding class discussion as a valuable but not exclusive means of teaching, and also as a reliable vehicle for assessing student comprehension. Capps argues for making our courses discussion-intensive, citing evidence that such courses generate increased student interest in the material taught as well as greater comprehension of that material. He indicates that, analogous to what is done in writing-intensive courses, standards may be set for discussion-intensive courses regarding the amount of discussion that is optimally productive for learning and regarding how much—and what sort of—participation in discussion should count toward a student's final grade.

There are, of course, various ways that an instructor can maximize opportunities for student participation in discussion as well as make clear to students the benefits of the discussion that takes place. Helpfully, Capps provides, in one of two appendices that he includes, guidelines for assessing student participation in discussion.

Our third article, "The Hidden Graduate Curriculum," is by Steven Cahn. We have decided to include Professor Cahn's article in our current issue even though it was previously published on the APA Blog (November 14, 2017) because it isn't clear how many readers of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* are also readers of the APA Blog, and we find the point of the article one of special importance for philosophy instructors. In this article, Cahn calls attention to the unfortunate messages that may be conveyed to students by their philosophy instructors, both by what these instructors say as well as by what they do.

This issue of our newsletter does *not* include a list of books received from publishers. That list will be included in our forthcoming issue.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

As always, we encourage our readers to write for our publication. We welcome papers that describe new courses or interesting experiences in teaching traditional courses; that contain innovative syllabi; and that suggest creative ways of motivating students and/or testing for the material taught.

Additionally, we are interested in publishing "review essays," essays that assess the available anthologies for one of the standard undergraduate courses (Introduction to Philosophy, Ethics and Meta-Ethics, Political and Social Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mind, etc.) Such reviews would be valuable to instructors in helping them decide which books to adopt for a course and/or to recommend to students as ancillary reading for that course. If you are interested in providing such a review, please let us know.

As always, we also not only welcome but strongly encourage readers to write papers that respond to, comment on, or take issue with *any* of the material that appears within our pages.

The following guidelines for submissions should be followed:

All papers should be sent to the editors electronically. The author's name, full mailing address, and the title of the paper should appear on a separate page. *Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear within the body or within the endnotes of the paper*. The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.

Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available from the APA. For example, in writing your paper to disk, *please do not use your word processor's footnote or endnote function; all notes must be added manually at the end of the paper*. This rule is extremely important, for it makes formatting the papers for publication much easier.

All articles submitted to the newsletter are blind-reviewed by the members of the editorial committee as follows:

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ARTICLES

Teaching Affirmative Action

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Like abortion, euthanasia, and world hunger, affirmative action is a standard topic in anthologies devoted to contemporary moral problems. The philosophical literature on the subject is extensive,[1] and debate on the issue remains heated. Yet teaching the subject presents special challenges, because opponents often appear to be arguing past each other. My aim in this paper is not to take sides in the controversy but to offer distinctions and examples that should motivate and focus discussion while avoiding misunderstandings.

To begin with, the term "affirmative action" refers to two entirely different policies. One is taking appropriate steps to eradicate practices of racial, gender, religious, or ethnic discrimination. Such procedural affirmative action, as I shall call it, is intended to guarantee that applicants for positions are judged on their merits, not their identities. Steps to ensure procedural affirmative action include open announcements of opportunities, blind reviewing, and a variety of efforts to eliminate from decision procedures any policies that harbor prejudice, however vestigial.

In another sense of "affirmative action," which I call "preferential affirmative action," the term signifies making special efforts to recruit individuals who meet institutional goals related to racial, gender, or ethnic identity. Doing so calls for attending to the same criteria that procedural affirmative action deems irrelevant. While procedural affirmative action is uncontroversial, preferential affirmative action is not, and in the remainder of this discussion my use of the term "affirmative action" should be understood as referring to "preferential affirmative action."

What is the point of affirmative action? Is it to offset past discrimination, counteract present unfairness, or achieve future equality? The first is often referred to as "compensation," the second as "a level playing field," and the third, "diversity."

Note that each of these aims can be defended independently of the others. Compensation for past wrongs may be owed,

although at present the playing field is level and future diversity is not sought. Or the playing field at present may not be level, although compensation for past wrongs is not owed and future diversity is not sought. Or future diversity may be sought, although compensation for past wrongs is not owed and, presently, the playing field is level.

Of course, all three factors might be relevant, but each requires a different justification and calls for a different remedy. For example, past wrongs would be offset if suitable compensation were made, but once provided to the appropriate recipients, no other steps would need to be taken. Present wrongs would be corrected if actions were taken that would level the playing field but doing so would be consistent with unequal outcomes. Future equality would require continuing attention to ensure that appropriate diversity, once achieved, would never be lost. Defenders of affirmative action typically favor at least one of these goals but not necessarily more than one.

As to diversity, the concept itself, if unmodified, is vacuous. Consider, for example, a sample of the innumerable respects in which people can differ: age, religion, nationality, regional background, wealth, economic resources, military experience, bodily appearance, physical soundness, sexual orientation, marital status, ethical standards, political commitments, or cultural values. The crucial question is which sorts of diversity should be sought?

Imagine a ten-person philosophy department which has no African American, no woman, no non-American, no person under fifty, no non-Christian, no registered Republican, none whose doctoral degree is from other than an Ivy League University, none who served in a war, none who is homosexual, none who was ever on welfare, none who is physically challenged, none whose work is outside the analytic tradition, none who specializes in aesthetics, and none who is widely heralded for success as a teacher. When the next appointment is made, what characteristics should be stressed so as to render this department more diverse? Those who defend affirmative action to achieve diversity need to specify which sorts of diversity are to be sought, which not, and why.

To put the matter vividly, suppose that the ten finalists for a position in that department include an African American, a woman, an Argentinian, a thirty-year-old, a Buddhist, a Republican, someone whose doctoral degree is from a midwestern university, a veteran, someone who was once on welfare, someone who uses a wheelchair, a homosexual, a specialist in continental philosophy, an aesthetician, and a widely acclaimed teacher. Which one should be favored purely on grounds of enhancing diversity?

Suppose the suggestion is made that the sorts of diversity to be sought are those of groups that have suffered discrimination. The problem with this approach is clearly put by John Kekes:

It is true that American blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, and women have suffered injustices as a group. But so have homosexuals, epileptics, the urban and the rural poor, the physically ugly, those whose careers were ruined by McCarthyism, prostitutes, the obese, and so forth. . . .

There have been some attempts to deny that there is an analogy between these two classes of victims. It has been said that the first were unjustly discriminated against due to racial or sexual prejudice and that this is not true of the second. This is indeed so. But should we accept the suggestion…that the only form of injustice relevant to preferential treatment is that which is due to racial or sexual prejudice? Injustice occurs in many forms, and those who value justice will surely object to all of them.[2]

Kekes's reasoning is cogent. In addition, another difficulty looms for the proposal to seek diversity only of groups that have suffered discrimination. Consider, for instance, a department in which most of the faculty members are women. In certain fields, for example, nursing, dental hygiene, and elementary education, such departments are common. If diversity by gender is of value, then such a department, when making its next appointment, should prefer a man. Yet men as a group have not been victims of discrimination. On the other hand, Jews and Asians have historically been victims of discrimination but do not presently suffer from minimal representation.

Nor is the situation clarified by arguing that the appeal to diversity favors those from a group who experience the world from a distinctive standpoint. Celia Wolf-Devine has aptly described this claim as a form of "stereotyping" that is "demeaning." As she puts it, "A Hispanic who is a Republican is no less a Hispanic, and a woman who is not a feminist is no less a woman."[3] Furthermore, are Hispanic men and women supposed to have the same point of view in virtue of their common ethnicity, or are they supposed to have different points of view in virtue of their different genders? And why suppose one's point of view is determined only by one's race, gender, or ethnicity? Why not also by the numerous other significant respects in which people differ, such as age, religion, sexual orientation, political outlook, and so on? Perhaps a compelling answer to this question can be offered, but defenders of the criterion of diversity need to provide one.

Every affirmative action plan calls for giving preference to members of certain groups, but the concept of preference itself is unclear. For example, imagine a search for an assistant professor in which one hundred persons apply, and among them are some who are members of a group designated for affirmative action. Let us refer to those individuals as AA candidates.

Suppose the dean has permitted five applicants to be invited for campus interviews. After studying one hundred vitae and sets of recommendations, the department ranks ten candidates as outstanding, twenty as good, fifty as merely qualified, and twenty as unqualified. Let us suppose that four applicants are AA candidates, and among them, one is ranked as outstanding, one as good, one as merely qualified, and one as unqualified.

The key question is this: Assuming AA candidates are to be preferred, what forms of preference are called for? One possibility is to agree to interview any AA candidate who is outstanding, regardless of the merits of any other outstanding candidates. Another possibility is to agree to interview any AA candidate who is good, even though many other candidates are stronger. Yet another possibility is to agree to interview any AA candidate who is qualified, even though, again, most candidates are stronger. A theoretical possibility is to interview even unqualified AA candidates, although I know of no one who would support that policy, so let us set it aside. What remains are three different models of preference, any of which might be defended.

Next, assume that two AA candidates are chosen for interviews, one who was ranked as outstanding and another ranked as good. Afterwards, the department places the outstanding candidate second and the other fifth. Does giving preference to AA candidates require that the second candidate be offered the position? And if the candidate ranked second receives a more attractive offer and withdraws from consideration, need the candidate now ranked fifth be preferred?

Of course, an AA candidate may be ranked the highest, thus avoiding any problems. Otherwise, the call for giving preference requires an interpretation that is rarely, if ever, announced beforehand.

Furthermore, even assuming that the department has explicitly agreed to a policy regarding preference, the question remains whether that policy will be made public. Suppose, for instance, that the administration has told the department that its next appointment needs to be an AA candidate.

Shouldn't that information be publicized so that those who are members of the groups in question and those who are not can plan accordingly? Surely those who have instituted a policy of preference believe that their action is within moral and legal bounds. No one should object, therefore, to stating that policy without equivocation. Yet the usual approach is to keep such information under wraps.

Such secrecy, however, leads to difficulties. For instance, during my years as an administrator, I once met with a candidate who was considering our school's offer of a faculty position and sought my assurance that he would have been chosen regardless of affirmative action. I responded truthfully that he was held in high regard but that I didn't know the answer to his concern. Yet I believe he was entitled to raise the matter. For whatever the steps required by a school's affirmative action policy, surely they should not be hidden.

Thus far I have focused on faculty appointments, but different considerations may arise in justifying affirmative action in undergraduate student admissions. After all, colleges traditionally take account of a high school applicant's athletic prowess, community service, personal relationships to alumni, and geographic home. Such criteria, however, are not considered in a faculty search. No wonder defenders of affirmative action are most comfortable supporting it in the context of a complex admissions decision involving many non-academic factors, while opponents most often think of the policy in relation to assessing the research and teaching of applicants for faculty positions. The two decisions are different in kind, and the same arguments may not apply to both.

In addition, circumstances matter. Consider a department that has never appointed a woman and, when given a promising opportunity, refuses even to interview one. Suppose the dean insists that in the next search process some women should be interviewed, and if a woman with a superlative record is found, she should be appointed. Would opponents of affirmative action object? I think not.

On the other hand, consider a department that announces its intention to achieve a goal of 50 percent women, and in its next search prefers a minimally qualified woman to a man who is far more promising as a researcher, teacher, and contributor to the life of the department. If the dean insists that the man be appointed, would proponents of affirmative action be upset? Again, I think not.

Both these cases are admittedly extreme, although not entirely unrealistic, but the lesson is that presuming affirmative action to be at odds with merit, as its opponents do, or to be a means of obtaining justice, as its defenders do, are oversimplifications. The context matters.

So does the setting. The same arguments for and against affirmative action may not apply in public and private schools, undergraduate and graduate admissions, academic and non-academic institutions, and so forth. No single line of argument will suffice in all cases.

In sum, the complexities inherent in affirmative action need to be recognized, and guiding a class to become aware of them provides students with a powerful example of how philosophy can shed light on contested social policies.

NOTES

1. A comprehensive collection is Steven M. Cahn, ed., *The Affirmative Action Debate*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2002).

2. John Kekes, "The Injustice of Strong Affirmative Action," in *Affirmative Action and the University: A Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 151.

3. Celia Wolf-Devine, "Proportional Representation of Women and Minorities," in *Affirmative Action and the University: A Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 230.

The Case for Discussion-Intensive Pedagogy

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Many philosophers view discussion as a key part of how we teach. Whether in seminars, large lecture classes, or online courses, many of us deliberately make time for student discussion. Sometimes we do this for pedagogical reasons, since evidence suggests that discussion fosters both greater student engagement and comprehension of the course material.[1] Sometimes we do this for more idealistic reasons. As Brookfield and Preskill note, discussion is "an indispensable part of democratic education. It teaches us dispositions and practices, provides us with the opportunity to serve and connect with others, and tests our ability to confront the most difficult of problems and think them through collaboratively."[2] Sometimes we do this for specific disciplinary reasons, believing that discussion is especially well suited for what we, as philosophy professors, aim to do in the classroom. Discussion seems ideally suited to encouraging our students to think critically, to consider a variety of points of view, and to give reasons in support of their positions. And, finally, some of us use class discussion to model how philosophy is itself an ongoing discussion between different figures and positions.

Discussion, in other words, probably gives you a warm fuzzy feeling. But I'm also willing to bet that most of us can't give a clear definition of what discussion is, that much of what people call discussion isn't really discussion at all, that we are often muddled about the reasons for discussion-oriented pedagogy, and that, for the most part, we're not very good at making the case for discussion to administrators.

Even though we teach courses that are, in some way or another, discussion-oriented, there is surprisingly little attention paid to what counts as discussion and why it is valuable to our students. Here I'll argue that we—as teachers of philosophy—are missing an important opportunity to highlight the value of what we do, and to frame what we do so that we can do it better. In particular, I'll argue for a distinction between two (sometimes overlapping) types of discussion-oriented classes: those that are discussion-*based* and those that are discussion-*intensive* (to coin a term). I'll draw on some preliminary findings, based on work my colleagues and I have done, to conclude that discussion-intensive courses are especially well suited to demonstrating the value of discussion and, by extension, the value of philosophy.

1. DISCUSSION: WHAT IT IS

Though many—perhaps most—of us incorporate discussion into our courses, conversations with colleagues will show that we use discussion in different ways and to different degrees. As a result, we also have different criteria for what counts as a discussion. Some of us use discussion as a break from, or a supplement to, lecturing: we use it to gauge student comprehension, to clarify possible confusions, to make sure different points of view are heard, or, sometimes, to shake things up when students seem bored or distracted.

Other times, some of us use discussion to increase student engagement through activities such as pair-shares, book clubs, or split room debates.[3] For some of us, discussion requires a small, seminar-sized class, preferably with advanced students, while others incorporate discussion into large, lower-level lecture courses. On this last point, some of us would question whether genuine discussion is even possible in large classes, regardless of the level of student participation; others will claim that discussion can flourish in large classes even if the amount of participation per student is relatively low.

Likewise, in the educational literature on discussion-oriented pedagogy, there is little consensus on what discussion is. In fact, sometimes the bar is set so low that almost any activity could count as discussion. Howard, for example, writes that "participation in discussion can take the form of occasional questions or comments in the class as a whole, interacting with others in a small group or even pairs, or making more formal oral presentations to the class."[4] This generous conception of discussion doesn't seem right: certainly discussion can't consist *only* of "occasional questions or comments," and an oral presentation, by itself, is not a discussion. Barkley offers "dyadic interviews" as an example of a discussion-oriented activity: here, pairs of students interview each other and the role of the interviewer "is to ask questions, listen, and probe for further information *but not to evaluate or respond with his or her own ideas*."[5] Again, this doesn't sound like a discussion. Whatever the value of dyadic interviews, if the interviewer cannot contribute his or her own ideas, this is not a discussion. For example, Zwiers and Crawford would disagree with Barkley since they hold that a core skill of paired conversations is the opportunity to "build on and/or challenge a partner's idea."[6]

Given this lack of consensus, it makes sense to have an understanding of discussion that is strict in some ways and loose in others. It should be strict so that discussion is distinguished from question-and-answer periods, small group lectures, and casual conversations among peers. (Frank Ramsey put this nicely when he distinguished discussion from merely "comparing notes."[7]) Our understanding of discussion should be loose so that we don't, as a matter of definition, prevent discussion from happening in both large and small classes, among both beginning and advanced students, face-to-face and online, in an entire class or in smaller breakout groups. (Whether discussion can take place in large classes, or among beginning students, is at least partly an empirical question.) This strategy—being strict about the criteria for discussion while being relatively relaxed about the conditions under which discussion takes place—has a strategic benefit. It allows us to focus more on what is within our control—what happens in our classes—rather than on what generally is not, such as the size, level, and student profile of the classes we are assigned to teach. While it is important to have institutional support for discussion-oriented pedagogy, it's also important that, at the outset at least, we don't limit discussion to only some sorts of classes (upper level seminars, say) that may be more common in some departments than in others.

But what *is* discussion? I suspect that, for many of us, "discussion" is analogous to Potter Stewart's test for obscenity: we lack clear criteria but know it when we see it.[8] Still, there are examples in the literature that can help us triangulate the meaning of the concept. Howard defines "discussion" as verbal interaction "with the material, the professor, and their classmates"[9]—though, as we've seen, this leads him to equate asking questions and giving presentations with participating in a discussion. (I would argue that verbally quizzing students isn't discussion and neither is pausing to ask, "are there any questions?") Zwiers and Crawford, while focusing primarily on primary and secondary education, describe discussion as "conversations" between "people who are trying to learn from one another and build meanings that they didn't have before."[10] Haroutunian-Gordon describes "interpretive discussion" as a "conversation between people who together seek to understand the meaning of a text."[11] Finally, Brookfield and Preskill define "discussion" as "an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique."[12]

While it's possible to disagree about the details of these definitions, something like the following seems right: that discussion is *a conversational process that builds understanding by cooperatively presenting and engaging different points of view*. This definition does much of the work we need. By highlighting conversation, it distinguishes discussion from question-and-answer sessions and in-class presentations. By aiming at understanding, it encourages more than just knowledge of particular facts but instead something closer to what Elgin describes as "a grasp of a comprehensive body of information . . . that enables non-trivial inference, argument, and perhaps action regarding that subject the information pertains to."[13] By emphasizing cooperation, we can distinguish discussion from more adversarial interactions, even when discussion involves significant disagreement. And, finally, by requiring presentation and engagement with different points of view, discussion places a burden on participants to actively contribute, not passively spectate or merely "compare notes." This definition is strict where we need it, distinguishing discussion from other forms of class interaction and levels of student engagement. On this definition, some courses may truly be discussion-free zones, for a variety of reasons. But this definition is also loose where we want it, placing no barriers on the type of course where discussion takes place, its level, or its subject-matter. (As noted above, we should expect to determine such barriers empirically, not by definition.)

2. THE CASE FOR DISCUSSION-ORIENTED CLASSES

As noted earlier, there are several good reasons why many of us incorporate discussion into our classes. Some researchers point to discussion as a way of increasing student engagement;[14] there is also evidence that discussion may increase student comprehension of the course material. Finally, as Brookfield and Preskill note, discussion can model skills that are essential in democratic communities: following John Dewey, they write that

"discussion and democracy are inseparable because both have the same root purpose—to nurture and promote human growth."[15] As a result, there's reason to think that discussion accomplishes at least three separate goals: it increases student engagement with the material, it enhances student comprehension, and it fosters democratic attitudes, as Brookfield and Preskill argue. It's easy to see that these goals are distinct and a given pedagogy may serve none, one, two, or all three of these goals.

More generally, the benefits of discussion fall into two categories. On the one hand, discussion can have instrumental benefits where we place value primarily on the *content* of the discussion. Here, discussion supports course goals by enhancing engagement with, and comprehension of, the course material—goals that might also be achieved in other ways—with the result that content takes priority over process. On the other hand, discussion can be viewed as having a more intrinsic benefit, where we place value on the *process* of discussion and on acquiring the skills that effective discussions foster. Here, process takes priority over content: it may not matter so much if the topic is Plato or de Beauvoir, or if students can decipher all twelve of Kant's categories, so long as they successfully build understanding through a conversational process that presents and engages different points of view. (There are similarities here with the role of writing, where we may not care so much what students write about, or the position they defend, so long as their writing is clear and well argued. I'll come back to the similarity between writing and discussion below.)

As a result, when we make the case for discussion-oriented courses—whether to colleagues, administrators, or students—these arguments tend to appeal either to its instrumental benefits (discussion promotes engagement with and comprehension of course content) or to its intrinsic benefits (discussion models civic virtue). Barkley and Zwiers and Crawford provide examples of the former sort of argument; Brookfield and Preskill of the latter. It's probably no surprise that the former, instrumental, argument has received more attention in the literature since it has the advantage of being more directly assessable. Simply put, students' current level of engagement and comprehension can be more easily measured than their current and future level of civic virtue.

However, there's another way of framing the intrinsic, process-oriented benefits of discussion. Rather than emphasizing civic virtue, as Brookfield and Preskill do, this is to focus on a more mundane yet inescapable reality: the fact that many, perhaps most, of our students will spend a significant part of their professional lives participating in what we call discussions—but which outside of classrooms are commonly called "meetings." A productive meeting, like a productive discussion, is generally one with multiple participants, well-defined issues, and a well-defined outcome. In fact, since few of our students will go on to become philosophy professors, this is one area where we will have much in common: that we can all look forward to spending many hours in meetings where ideas and proposals are discussed and where the difference between a good and a bad meeting, between someone who can

"run a meeting" and someone who can't, between those who can contribute effectively and those who can't, is all too evident. Again, there's overlap with writing and our expectation that the ability to write clearly on an academic subject is good training for, and will translate over to, the ability to write clearly in a professional setting. From this perspective, discussion has the benefit of teaching, in a controlled setting, a skill that is as useful to our students' success as the ability to write clearly and persuasively.

Furthermore, there's evidence that the ability to participate effectively in a discussion—which, again, is different from public speaking or being able to give a PowerPoint presentation—is widely recognized as a valuable cognitive and practical skill. For example, a recent Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) study found that employers rank "the ability to effectively communicate orally" and "the ability to work effectively with others in teams" as the two most important learning outcomes (even above "the ability to effectively communicate in writing")—and yet only 37 percent of employers report that recent college graduates are prepared to work on teams, and only 28 percent report that recent college graduates are effective oral communicators.[16] Of course, there are many ways for students to practice these skills—including problem-based learning and so on—but discussion-oriented classes have a special role to play. These courses give students the opportunity to forge common understandings through discussion and conversation: exactly the skills underlying the outcomes highlighted in the AAC&U report.

This is an important reason—in addition to the ones mentioned above—for incorporating discussion into our classes. Not only does discussion aid student engagement and comprehension, and not only may it foster civic virtue, but it arguably fosters skills that transfer outside of the classroom. Just as writing helps our students better understand the material, and just as writing is appreciated as a necessary skill outside of academia, the ability to discuss and converse effectively is a valuable skill for our students to model, practice, and acquire.

3. DISCUSSION-BASED COURSES

If we accept the value of discussion, the next question is how to incorporate discussion into our courses. Even though standards of "discussion" differ, "discussion-based" courses are already a standard feature at many colleges and universities.[17] These courses use discussion as the primary form of pedagogy, with the majority of class time devoted to discussion. Among other things this means that, as Yamane notes, discussion-based courses typically "downplay transmission and memorization of factual information and . . . emphasize higher order thinking skills such as synthesis of ideas and evaluation of arguments."[18] Yamane, for example, reports that in a discussion-based course he lectures 26 percent of the time, as opposed to 80 percent of the time in a lecture-based course on the same topic.[19]

A drawback with discussion-based courses is that it can be difficult—not impossible, perhaps, but difficult—to see how courses in some disciplines and areas can be discussion-based. It's hard, for example, to imagine how courses in organic chemistry or calculus or piano could be offered in a discussion-based format. There are institutional and economic factors at work as well. For example, even if it were clear how to teach a physical science in a discussion-based format, the way such courses are frequently taught—large lecture classes, lab sections led by student TAs, prepackaged PowerPoint slides supplied by the textbook publisher—places serious structural impediments in the way of discussion-based pedagogy.

These obstacles can also exist for philosophy courses. Depending on the size of the course (large or small), its place in the curriculum (lower or upper level), the audience (philosophy majors or general education), the number of prerequisites, or even the layout of the physical classroom, it may be difficult—again, not impossible, but certainly difficult—to conceive how a particular course could be discussion-based. That's not necessarily a bad thing: courses can, of course, be important, informative, and engaging without being discussion-based. But it should lead us to consider how courses can incorporate a meaningful amount of discussion, regardless of external and institutional factors, without necessarily being discussion-based.

4. DISCUSSION-INTENSIVE COURSES

For the last few years philosophy faculty at Rochester Institute of Technology have been piloting a project of designating courses as *discussion-intensive*. (To the best of my knowledge, this term has not been used elsewhere.) These courses are discussion-*oriented* but not discussion-*based*. Discussion-intensive courses include a significant and assessable role for discussion but without the assumption that discussion is the primary form of pedagogy, or that a majority of class time is spent in discussion.

Discussion-intensive courses build on the model of writing-intensive courses that are a familiar part of the undergraduate curriculum. While conceptions of "writing-intensive" vary to some degree, Farris and Smith's definition is widely accepted, identifying the following key features:

1) Small class size (15–25 students)
2) Taught by faculty, not teaching assistants
3) A specified word count to be achieved over the course of the term
4) Opportunities for and detailed guidance in making meaningful revisions
5) Writing assignments constitute a significant part of the course grade
6) A variety of different writing assignments spread across the term
7) Guidelines that ensure common teaching techniques across different sections
8) Availability of support services, such as writing tutors or a campus writing center[20]

In addition, writing-intensive courses often set aside class time to focus on writing mechanics, on commonly accepted standards of quality writing, on strategies for writing efficiently, and on ways of overcoming anxiety and writer's block.

Colleges and universities use writing-intensive courses in different ways. Depending on the university, writing-intensive courses sometimes include a required first-year seminar, can be required as part of a student's major (aka "writing in the discipline"), or are part of a "writing across the curriculum" model where students encounter writing-intensive courses multiple times and in multiple places over their college careers.

The rationale for specifying certain courses as writing-intensive, and for developing specific criteria for these courses, is that doing so emphasizes both the importance of writing and the concrete steps that can maximize these benefits. We can do the same for discussion. Using the writing-intensive criteria as a model, there are similar criteria for discussion-intensive courses. The following is a good baseline:

1) Taught by faculty, not teaching assistants
2) A significant amount of class time spent in discussion
3) A significant part of the course grade based on quality of participation in discussions
4) A variety of ways for students to contribute, including participating in discussions, giving presentations, and facilitating or leading discussion on designated days
5) Guidelines that ensure common teaching techniques and standards across different sections
6) Class time devoted to meta-discussion: to discussing the purposes of discussion, criteria of successful discussions, strategies for contributing to discussions, and ways of overcoming anxiety. This can be done by assigning texts from the educational and philosophical literature, by distributing guidelines, or by handing out rubrics—all of which are ripe for discussion.[21]

The stickiest criterion is probably the second: "a significant amount of class time spent in discussion." How much time is "significant"? Requiring more than 50 percent seems to set the threshold too high and would blur the distinction between discussion-intensive and discussion-based courses. Allowing less than 33 percent seems to set the threshold too low and not nearly intensive enough. As a rule of thumb, as a result, I'd recommend that at least 40 percent of class time be devoted to discussion. It's important to note, also, that the amount of class time devoted to discussion may shift over the course of the term, depending on the material and level of student engagement. It's not unusual for more class time to be spent on discussion as students become more familiar with the format and proficient with the skill.

Another sticking point is the third criterion: assessing the quality of participation in discussions. There are many ways of doing this, such as real-time grading and self-assessments.[22] Rubrics are another way of assessing both the quality of discussion at both the course and individual student level. For example, Appendices 1 and 2 contain rubrics I have developed and used at RIT: these provide a way of assessing discussion both at the level of individual students (Do students engage with each other and their views or merely "share notes"? Do their comments aim at factual clarification or at a deeper understanding of the reasons for and against a position?) as well as at the level of an entire class meeting (Did only a few students speak or a diverse majority? Did students achieve a better understanding by hearing multiple perspectives, or did the discussion go off-topic? Did the discussion stay focused on the text, or did it become unmoored and anecdotal?). Rubrics such as these allow us to track not only individual student performance in discussion but also the class as a whole—which can help us monitor our own performance as well.

Discussion-intensive courses thus devote significant time and attention to discussion by consciously and explicitly using it as a core pedagogy, by placing significant weight on participation in the final grade, and by making discussion itself one of the topics of conversation. There may be overlap between discussion-intensive and traditional discussion-based courses. But there are also significant differences: one important difference is that discussion-intensive courses are built on a shared understanding of what discussion is and incorporate meta-discussion about discussion itself. These features are often missing from discussion-based courses.

In addition, unlike writing-intensive courses, these criteria do not specify a small class size. Whereas writing-intensive courses typically involve significant amounts of grading and feedback, this is not usually an expectation with regard to discussion. (Of course, if a discussion-intensive course does involve this level of feedback, then that becomes a good reason for a lower course cap. Also, as noted below, this doesn't let faculty off the hook in terms of having a system for assessing participation.) However, as with writing-intensive courses, these criteria do set standards for what counts as discussion-intensive, including the amount of discussion, the attention paid to discussion in calculating the final grade, allowing various opportunities for participation, and conscious attention paid to the mechanics of successful discussion and our role in creating an atmosphere that maximizes student participation and interaction. (The latter can be done in a variety of ways, ranging from modeling different discursive strategies, actively encouraging student participation, working to ensure that a diversity of student voices are heard, and offering capsule summaries to help clarify the results of discussions.)

These criteria also place a significant burden on faculty (one reason for limiting these courses to regular faculty, not TAs). If a significant part of the course grade depends on quality of participation, then, at the very least, faculty should keep track of quality and quantity of the participation. However, these criteria also provide a significant degree of flexibility. Discussion-intensive courses can incorporate other pedagogies (lectures, service- and experiential learning, group work, etc.), be configured in various ways, vary in size, and cover a range of topics. While a discussion-based section of symbolic logic, for instance, may be difficult to design, a discussion-intensive section—where lectures and demonstrations are balanced by discussion of material implication, logical fatalism, or bivalence, among other topics—is considerably easier to imagine.

For the last two years we've been piloting discussion-intensive philosophy courses at Rochester Institute of Technology. By emphasizing that these courses are by design discussion-intensive and by setting clear criteria for these courses, we've found a receptive audience among both students and college administration. With the support of administration, who have recognized the pedagogical value of discussion (especially in the liberal arts), we've lowered the caps on upper-level philosophy courses. Based on anonymous course evaluations, the response from students has been overwhelmingly positive. Because we explain the purpose of discussion, make discussion itself one of the course topics, and demonstrate the intentionality behind our pedagogy, students can clearly see our pedagogical commitments and help determine whether we meet them. They place value both on the class content and the class process and, as a result, see the necessity of playing an active role in our classes' success.

So while discussion-intensive courses present certain challenges—no pedagogy will be right for all faculty all the time—they also offer advantages both to individual faculty and to departments. Many of us probably already teach courses that are discussion-intensive, or nearly so. By having a set of formal standards—which the criteria above attempt to supply—we reap the benefits of being more self-conscious and deliberate about our pedagogy. And by having a common conception of what we do, and how and why we do it, we have been able to highlight our commitment as a department to an important set of student outcomes: not just a deep understanding of the course material but also a demonstrable commitment to engagement, collaboration, and quality student interaction. While understanding the course material is a desired outcome of all classes, discussion-intensive courses are also built around the latter outcomes as well.

Discussion-intensive classes are not, of course, limited to a particular topic or discipline—but, having said that, courses with a certain kind of philosophical or theoretical content may be especially well suited to this sort of pedagogy. Where the goal is action-oriented understanding (in Elgin's sense) and not just knowledge, and where the engagement of different points of view is a routine expectation—as is often the case in philosophy—discussion is an obvious pedagogical option. Moreover, to the extent that discussion-intensive courses have demonstrable value (and I would argue that they do, in the same ways as more familiar writing-intensive courses), this also points to the value of those disciplines where discussion-intensive courses are most naturally at home. The value of discussion-intensive pedagogy points to the curricular value of philosophy.

Even though discussion is a common feature of what we do as philosophers and teachers, it hasn't received a lot of attention: for the most part, we simply know it when we see it. But it's not enough to just pay lip service to discussion. Rather, it's in our own and in our students' interests to be clear about what discussion is, how it functions in our classes, what benefits it provides, and what outcomes it supports. Creating discussion-intensive courses is an effective way to demonstrate the value of discussion—and *philosophical* discussion in particular—to our students, our colleagues, and ourselves.

APPENDIX 1
Discussion Intensive Assessment Rubric: Assessment of Individual Student Participation

Criteria	1	2	3	4
Level of Engagement	Rarely if ever speaks; displays signs of boredom or disengagement.	Speaks occasionally (in less than half of classes); displays signs of engagement and attentiveness even when not actively participating.	Speaks often (at least once or twice in more than half of classes); otherwise displays signs of active engagement.	Speaks consistently (in nearly all classes) and usually more than once or twice per class.
Quality of Student Contributions to Discussion	Contributions show little evidence that student completed or understood the reading/assignment: contributions are often vague, draw on personal experience, or are irrelevant to the assignment or discussion topics.	Contributions show basic understanding and comprehension of the reading/assignment; questions and comments go beyond requests for clarification and contributions are directly related to the text or discussion.	In addition to reflecting understanding of the reading/assignment, contributions take a position either for or against the positions presented; relevant background knowledge from other classes may be used to support position.	Contributions are consistently thoughtful and insightful; positions are defended, objections are considered; beyond taking a position, there is also constructive engagement with both the text and other students' comments and discussion.
Quality of Interaction in Discussion	Little interaction in discussion with other students; contributions are not clearly connected to themes of reading/assignment.	Able to present personal points of view on themes of reading/assignment, but there is little engagement with comments made by other students; interactions take the form of "sharing notes" rather than active engagement; little disagreement or agreement with other students.	Active engagement with other students' views, including reasoned disagreement or agreement. Interactions often involve giving reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with others' positions.	Significant engagement with other students aimed at greater understanding, clarity, and consensus; disagreements are clearly aired with the aim of understanding their basis and grounds for resolving differences; agreement isn't merely echoing other students but aims at refining and clarifying positions.
Outcomes	Displays some understanding of the reading/assignment; at a minimum is able to express main ideas, themes and factual content; can engage in conversation on at most a factual level, correcting and responding to inaccuracies and misinterpretations.	Basic understanding of the reading/assignment beyond grasp of factual content; can also demonstrate understanding of main reasons for and against a given position; is able to converse with others to understand these reasons, but is not yet able to articulate a clear position on the topic under discussion, or to defend that position.	Deeper understanding of reading/assignment and able to express the reasons for and against a particular position; can take a clear position on the reading/assignment and defend it with reasons; is able to engage and appreciate differing perspectives.	Sophisticated understanding of reading/assignment, including reasons for and against the position presented and the theoretical and practical importance of the point argued; is able to express not only where one stands but why; is furthermore able to engage in cooperative conversation with the goal of clarifying positions and aiming for consensus.

APPENDIX 2
Discussion Intensive Assessment Rubric: Class-Level Assessment

Criteria	1	2	3	4
Class Participation (contingent on class size)	Few students speak; professor carries burden of eliciting responses; many students seem disengaged or bored; discussion is punctuated with mini-lectures, perhaps in response to questions.	Several students speak, but not necessarily a diverse group; some students seem disengaged or bored; professor plays active and frequent role in guiding discussion or offering clarification.	A diverse majority of students speak; other students display signs of active engagement; professor is not called on to play overly prominent or frequent role in discussion; students are able to carry discussion for limited periods of time.	Nearly all students contribute at some point during the class. Lecturing is minimal, and professor is not required to provide extensive background or clarification, or to guide discussion; students are able to carry discussion for majority of class.
Quality of Discussion	Discussion shows that students did not complete or understand the reading; contributions are either vague, drawing exclusively on personal experience, or irrelevant; student comments require extensive responses in order to clarify basic themes.	Discussion shows that students have basic understanding of the reading; comments go beyond requests for clarification; contributions are often directly related to text; some students present and engage different points of view.	Discussion goes beyond basic understanding of the text, including examination of general reasons for and against positions presented. Active conversations among several students. Students stake out positions and may bring in knowledge from other classes.	Discussions foster significant collaboration and understanding through the expression of various perspectives. Students engage in genuine conversation with each other, offering reasons and considering objections. Significant engagement with both the text and with each other with the goal of achieving a common cooperative understanding.
Quality of Interaction in Discussion	Minimal student interaction; discussion is closer to a Q&A session with the professor primarily answering questions and clarifying points.	Students present personal points of view, but there is little engagement with each other; discussion is closer to sharing notes. Little expressed agreement or disagreement with other students.	Students actively engage and interact with each other; reasons are given for agreement and disagreement; students are able to engage and understand different points of view.	Students engage and interact with each other; disagreements may arise and some resolved depending on the question and evidence available. Interaction achieves greater understanding, clarity, and building consensus (or greater understanding of different points of view).
Outcomes	Most students have some understanding of day's reading/assignment, are able to express main points, and can recognize obvious inaccuracies and misinterpretations.	Most students understand basics of the day's assignment plus some obvious points for and against. However most students aren't able to articulate a clear position on the topics under discussion: they "don't know where they stand."	Most students understand day's assignment and some deeper implications of the day's reading, as well as a range of reasons for and against; are able to take a position on the reading/assignment and defend it with reasons, but aren't always able to constructively engage other students who may agree or disagree.	Students achieve a sophisticated understanding of a day's assignment, including reasons for and against the position presented and the theoretical and practical importance of the point argued. Students have a clear idea of where they stand and why, and are able to constructively engage other students who agree or disagree in order to change minds, clarify positions, or achieve consensus.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

1. See, for example, George Kuh et al., *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), as well as Jay Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 6.

2. Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, 20.

3. Elizabeth Barkley, *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*, 202, 212.

4. Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 5.

5. Barkley, *Student Engagement Techniques*, 305 (emphasis added).

6. Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford, *Academic Conversations*, 31.

7. Frank Ramsey, "Epilogue" in *Philosophical Papers*, 247.

8. Appealing to the dictionary definition doesn't help, either. Merriam-Webster defines "discussion" as "consideration of a question in open and usually informal debate." Not only are there many types and levels of "consideration"—which this definition leaves ambiguous—but certainly there is an important distinction between a discussion and a debate. While the latter

often connotes contentiousness and opposing sides, I'll argue below that discussion is best seen as a collaborative and not adversarial process.

9. Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 5.

10. Zwiers and Crawford, *Academic Conversations*, 1.

11. Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, *Learning to Teach Through Discussion: The Art of Turning the Soul*, 2.

12. Brookfield and Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, 6.

13. Catherine Elgin, "Understanding and the Facts," 39.

14. Barkley, *Student Engagement Techniques*, 152.

15. Brookfield and Preskill, *Discussion as Way of Teaching*, 3.

16. Hart Research Associates, "Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success," http://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research/2015-survey-results.

17. Discussion-based courses are often described as "seminars," but we shouldn't make the mistake of necessarily equating the two. "Seminar" turns out to be as vague and ambiguous as "discussion." See Carl Holladay and Luke Johnson, "What is a Seminar? Two Views of the Same Course," 27.

18. David Yamane, "Course Preparation Assignments: A Strategy for Creating Discussion-Based Courses," 242.

19. Ibid.

20. Christine Farris and Raymond Smith, "Writing Intensive Courses: Tools for Curricular Change," 53–54.

21. In addition to several of the sources cited here, the philosophical literature can be mined for conversations that illustrate the presence or absence of genuine discussion (the dialogues of Plato and Hume contain examples of both), David Chalmers has an extensive list of guidelines for effective philosophical discussion (http://consc.net/guidelines/), and the rubrics in Appendix 1 and 2 can be used both as a topic for discussion as well as a way of setting expectations for student participation. Of course, this is just the beginning: it isn't difficult to find texts that are worth

discussing not only for their philosophical content but for what they say about the importance of collaborative discussion. Two related examples are Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," 224–30, and Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy," 9–23.

22. Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, 150–51.

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The Hidden Graduate Curriculum

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The term "hidden curriculum" refers to the unstated attitudes that are often communicated to students as a by-product of school life. While the phrase is usually employed in the context of elementary and secondary education, it also applies at the graduate level, where future professors are acculturated to careers in academia.

One implicit message is that prestige follows from accomplishment as a researcher, not as a teacher. For example, which candidate for a faculty position is usually viewed as more attractive, the promising researcher or the promising teacher? Which of the two is more likely to be judged a strong candidate for tenure? The answers and the lesson are obvious: excellence in research is judged far more important than excellence in teaching.

A second message is that faculty members are entitled to put their own interests ahead of those of their students. Consider how departments decide graduate course offerings. The procedure is for individual professors to announce the topics of their choice; then that conglomeration becomes the curriculum. The list may be unbalanced or of little use to those preparing for their careers, but such concerns are apt to be viewed as irrelevant. The focus is not on meeting students' needs but on satisfying faculty desires.

Similarly, in a course ostensibly devoted to a survey of a major field of philosophy, the instructor may decide to distribute chapters of the instructor's own forthcoming book and ask students to help edit the manuscript. Whether this procedure is the best way to promote understanding of the fundamentals of the announced field is not even an issue.

Another instance of professorial primacy is readers who take months to return a chapter of a dissertation, explaining the delay by pointing to publishing deadlines they themselves face. Apparently, the student's deadlines for finishing the dissertation and obtaining a faculty position are not as important.

A third message is that when you listen to a speaker, you should pretend you understand what is being said, even when you don't. How many times do faculty members and students sit through a presentation grasping little or nothing of it, yet are unwilling to say so? Instead, they nod as if comprehending every word. In short, contra Socrates, the goal is always to appear knowledgeable.

But just the opposite ought to be the case. Professors should encourage students in class to indicate whenever they don't understand what is said. And such admissions should be met not with a put-down but with a compliment for intellectual honesty. After all, those afraid to admit what they do not grasp are defenseless against others who indulge in obfuscation.

These days signs around the country tell us that if we see something, we should say something. Graduate students should be advised to follow an analogous rule: if you don't understand something, say something.

Professors should be aware of the subliminal messages sent to graduate students, who learn from the hidden curriculum and eventually pass it on. Thus are unfortunate attitudes and practices transferred from one generation to another.

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