NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND COMPUTERS

FROM THE EDITOR, Ange Cooksey

FROM THE CHAIR, Marvin Croy

REVIEW

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“E-CAP05 Review”

ARTICLE

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Welcome to the latest edition of the Philosophy and Computers Newsletter. I am pleased to accept Marvin Croy’s invitation to work with this project, and I am enthusiastic about the issue presented here. In the pages below, you will read about the latest discoveries and the newest research in our field. This issue spotlights the recent conference of our E-CAP colleagues in Västerås, Sweden, and includes a provocative article by Peter Boltuc on e-learning and the impact of computing on the teaching of philosophy. Also included are ideas and insights from APA Philosophy and Computers Committee chair, Marvin Croy.

Thank you for your interest in this publication. I look forward to meeting and working with many of you in the upcoming months. Until then, please e-mail me (mcooksey@indiana.edu) with comments about this edition of the Newsletter and/or ideas for articles to be included next time.

From the Chair

Marvin Croy
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I am happy to welcome Ange Cooksey as the Committee’s new Philosophy and Computers Newsletter editor. Ange has been active for many years in both the administrative and faculty roles in respect to exploring innovative educational technologies. In this vein, she has delivered presentations at APA sessions sponsored by our PAC Committee, the International Association for Computing and Philosophy (IACAP), the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, and numerous other organizations. Her interests cover a wide range of subjects involving the intersection of philosophy and computing, and I am very much looking forward to working with her. Following in the footsteps of Jon Dorbolo, our outgoing editor, will be no easy task. Jon’s efforts certainly raised the bar in respect to the quality and usefulness of Newsletter articles. During the last year, Jon was elected as president of the International Association for Computing and Philosophy, and the Committee wishes Jon well in his new endeavors and thanks him for his contributions on many Committee matters.

As I mentioned in my last report, other changes are underway. Patrick Grim and Noam Cook are cycling off of the Committee, and Susan Stuart (University of Glasgow) and Brandon Fitelson (University of California–Berkeley) are just starting their terms. Patrick and Noam have been active contributors to Committee projects, especially in organizing invigorating sessions at APA Divisional meetings. Another change involves the resignation of Michael Kelly, executive director of the APA. Michael has been an ardent supporter of the efforts of all APA committees, and hopefully his enthusiastic encouragement and openness to dialogue will be continued by whomever succeeds him. In recent months, I have been working closely with Chris Caputo, APA webmaster, on implementing the electronic survey designed by our committee to gauge computer use within the profession. Hopefully this endeavor will not lose momentum given the change in executive director.

At the 2005 APA Central Division meeting, the 2004 Barwise Prize was presented to Deborah Johnson. Professor Johnson presented a thought-provoking paper (“Artifacts, Moral Philosophy, and Moral Agency”), which explored the moral standing of artifacts. Her presentation stimulated much interesting discussion. The photo here shows Professor Johnson accompanied by various committee members (left to right: Bruce Umbaugh, myself, Deborah Johnson, and Peter Boltuc). Deborah Johnson is the third recipient of the Barwise Prize. Previous recipients include Patrick Suppes and Daniel Dennett.

As for the future, Committee members will be orchestrating exciting sessions at upcoming Divisional meetings. Already planned are two sessions for the Eastern meeting in December 2005. Susan Stuart has organized a session featuring Ron Chrisley (University of Sussex, “What the Failure of Penrose’s Argument Against Al Tells Us about Computability”), Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic (Mårdalen University, “Semantic Information in System Modeling”), and Peter Boltuc (University of Illinois–Springfield, “Computers Contra Physicalism”). In addition, Bruce Umbaugh has arranged a session in which he and Kate Parsons (both of Webster University) will speak on the topic of “Do-It-Yourself Digital Audio and Video for the Philosophy Classroom: Old Wine in
New Technologies.” Both of these sessions promise to be great fun as well as intellectually rewarding, so please join us if you can. Keep an eye on the Proceedings for information on other Committee sessions.

That’s all for now. In my next report, I’ll detail various Committee projects and will provide an overview of where each stands given various changes in Committee membership and APA leadership. Let me know if you have questions, concerns, or suggestions related to PAC Committee activities.

—— REVIEW ——

E-CAP05 Review
Susan Stuart
University of Glasgow

The Program chair for the third European Computing and Philosophy 2005 (E-CAP05) conference was Professor Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic. The conference was hosted by her home institution, the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Mälardalen University (Mälardalens Högskola), Västerås, Sweden. Professor Dodig-Crnkovic was assisted in her organization by an international Program Committee and a very attentive and knowledgeable group of Local Organizers including: Christina Bortas, Baran Çürükü, Ylva Boivie, and Harriet Ekwall.

Västerås, the sixth largest city in Sweden, is a beautiful city situated on Lake Mälaren. The University is relatively new but, nonetheless, quite strikingly attractive, blending light-enhancing architecture with modern sculptural artifacts to give a sense of progress being made and comprehension being sought. This dynamic setting was certainly ideal for the first speaker of the conference and keynote, Greg Chaitin, who gave the Alan Turing Lecture on Computing and Philosophy entitled “Epistemology as Information Theory: From Leibniz to the Omega Number.” It was an invigorating start to the conference that provided us with a speculative metaphysics, something we tend to be more familiar with coming from the seventeenth century. Chaitin’s mix of digital philosophy and physics confronts the possibility of uncomputable real numbers by arguing that real numbers don’t exist. In support of his position, he presented us with an algorithmic information theory based on Leibniz’s dictum (1686) that the universe has been created simplest in hypotheses and richest in phenomena; thus, any explanation has to be simpler than that which it attempts to explain. Chaitin’s dynamic style of presentation and his ability to convey complex material set a cracking pace for the rest of the conference.

From here, we moved straight into an invited talk by Pedro Marijuan on “An Informational Approach to Biological Complexity” and three parallel sessions on Cognitive Science, Philosophy of Information, and Ontology, respectively. It is true that, for many people, it was rather hard making a decision about where to go because each of these sessions and the invited talk were running simultaneously, but, having been asked to chair the Ontology session, my decision had been made for me. Had it not been, I would probably have gone to the Cognitive Science session and missed the splendid set of papers presented by Amnon Eden and Raymond Turner, Davide Crippa, Srinandan Dasmahapatra, and Till Gruene-Yanoff. At one point, Eden and Turner raised the possibility of a philosophical analysis of software design, and, at another, they led us into the ontologically murky waters of levels of abstraction—strategic (global) and tactical (local)—and implementation. It was rousing stuff, as was Crippa’s Poincaré-inspired examination of the ontology of geometrical objects, and Dasmahapatra’s work on the ontological issues surrounding the representative and interpretative frameworks for, and diagnosis of, breast cancer. The session drew to a close with Gruene-Yanoff’s preference model that distinguished epistemic and descriptive perspectives within explanations of intentional states such as beliefs and desires. The conclusion, one with which we could all agree, was that preferences aren’t simple, and it’s partly because ontologies are so complex.

After lunch, we had the second keynote presentation, the Carl von Linné (Carolus Linnaeus) Lecture on Ontology, from Professor Barry Smith, who spoke specifically about “Biological Ontologies.” It was an eloquent account of the misapplication of controlled vocabularies, which provide an inflexible uniform framework within which it is supposed that items and their relations can be adequately described. The prominent example of a controlled vocabulary in Smith’s talk was the Gene Ontology, which, in their use of the very limited “is-a” and “part-of” relations, run counter to the rules of logic. One very telling failure was when “is-a” is used tacitly to mean “within,” for example, when wanting to express the fact that the embryo is in the uterus, the gene ontologist writes completely falsely that the embryo “is-a” uterus. It was, in equal measures, an amusing and alarming presentation.

Following this, we reverted to the parallel sessions with an invited talk from Ingvard Johansson on “Emergent Properties and Inference Rules,” alongside an array of sessions on Cognitive Science, the Philosophy of Information, and Ontology, respectively. It is quite strikingly attractive, blending light-enhancing architecture with modern sculptural artifacts to give a sense of progress being made and comprehension being sought. This dynamic setting was certainly ideal for the first speaker of the conference and keynote, Greg Chaitin, who gave the Alan Turing Lecture on Computing and Philosophy entitled “Epistemology as Information Theory: From Leibniz to the Omega Number.” It was an invigorating start to the conference that provided us with a speculative metaphysics, something we tend to be more familiar with coming from the seventeenth century. Chaitin’s mix of digital philosophy and physics confronts the possibility of uncomputable real numbers by arguing that real numbers don’t exist. In support of his position, he presented us with an algorithmic information theory based on Leibniz’s dictum (1686) that the universe has been created simplest in hypotheses and richest in phenomena; thus, any explanation has to be simpler than that which it attempts to explain. Chaitin’s dynamic style of presentation and his ability to convey complex material set a cracking pace for the rest of the conference.

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the molecular level when anesthetics are administered, we do
know that they can switch a network of neurons from high-
frequency firing to low-frequency firing. If further analysis
reveals what it is that is being inhibited, then we might have
some indication of what is important as the underpinning for
consciousness.

Again, a set of parallel sessions ran alongside this invited
lecture, and, again, there were strong panels of papers in each of
the Cognitive Science, Ontologies, and Biosemantics sections.
There is a high quality of interdisciplinary work being carried out
by E-CAP conference participants, and it was especially clear in
this session in Jessica Lindblom’s work on embodied cognition:
“Reaping the Best of Both Worlds: The Body-in-Motion Meets
Cultural Cognition,” in John Harpur’s “Philosophical Lessons in
Autism for Artificial Intelligence,” and in Daniel Novotny’s “How
to Deal with Granularity” in biosemantics.

After a brief coffee break, we resumed with sessions on
Computer Ethics, Biosemantics, and Cognitive Science. Once
again, my predilection was for the cognitive science stream, and
I was rewarded by a marvelous presentation from Keith
Downing, entitled “A Neuroscientific Barrier to Situated and
Embodied Artificial Intelligence,” in which he tackled Andy
Clark’s notion of cognitive incrementalism. This was followed
by an equally interesting but very different paper by Alexander
Riegler on purposeful robots and the paradox of autonomy,
after which there was a great deal of discussion.

As a way of picking up many of the threads raised in
previous sessions, the morning was rounded off with an invited
paper by Lorenzo Magnani on “Building Mimetic Minds from
the Prehistoric Brains to the Universal Machines.”

There was a very definite move into the territory of
cognitive science after lunch with the Georg Henrik von Wright
Lecture on Ethics being given by Terrell Bynum. The specific
title of his talk was “Ethics for a New Millennium: Cybernetics
and the Copernican Revolution in Ethics,” and, with his long
historical connection to both the American Association of
Philosophy Teachers (AAPT) and Computing and Philosophy (CAP), we were all entertained by his claim that he thinks of us as his grandchildren; it was especially entertaining to those of us who aren’t that much younger than
the man himself. Bynum’s main claim is that information ethics
is presenting us with a revolution in ethical discourse and that,
taking a line out of Aristotle’s book, excellence in information
processing will produce human flourishing. It was easy to see
some dovetailing between Bynum’s plea and Floridi’s information logic; if we employ the latter, we will, perhaps,
flourish.

And so the day progressed through a series of splendid
papers, including Philip Brey’s “The Epistemology and Ontology
of Human-Computer Interaction” and Søren Brier’s “A
Cybersemiotic View on Information and Computation,” right
into the evening with Tom Ziomek closing the day’s academic
proceedings with an invited paper on “Agent-Environment
State Machines.”

I think our wonderful host, Gordana, may have been testing
our stamina, though she was more likely demonstrating
Swedish beneficence, when, that evening, we were all invited
to the Town Hall for a very lively and welcoming reception by
the director of Industry and Commerce for Västerås, Helmer
Larsson, together with Inger Lindqvist from Västerås City
Council, who were full of praise for the organizers of E-CAP05.

On Saturday morning, the third and final day of the
conference, we made an early start with an invited paper from
Lena Trojer on “Building Epistemological Infrastructures—
Interventions at a Technical University” and parallel sessions
on Cognitive Science, Computer Ethics, and Computational
Linguistics. I had expected there to be some exhaustion
showing by this stage, but, extraordinary as it may seem,
everyone seemed as keen as on the first day. The papers
varied in subject matter but rarely in quality, and of the papers
I was able to attend—being unable to be in more than one
place at one time—Paavo Pylkkänen’s examination of
dynamical modeling as a possible explanation of temporal
consciousness made a particularly strong impression on me.
Time as a necessary aspect of consciousness intrigues many
of us, but there was something particularly engaging about
Pylkkänen’s weaving together of Husserl, David Bohm,
Heraclitus, and van Gelder into a conceptually coherent picture
that caught my imagination.

At this stage, the program seemed to move quite
corroborated toward computational linguistics with invited
papers from Torbjörn Lager on “Computational Linguistics and
Philosophy,” and Timo Honkela on “Translation within and
between Languages,” alongside parallel sessions, which now
included one on Gender and Technology. At this stage, I
decided to go for a complete change of scenery, so I attended
a series of thoroughly enjoyable and richly stimulating papers
by Magnus Sahlgren on word spaces as geometric metaphors
for meaning, Pascale Sébèlot on symbolic machine learning,
and Pius ten Hacken on computational linguistics as an applied
science. Their presentations had a clarity that made it possible
for a novice like me to follow but were challenging enough to
provoke the more knowledgeable members of the audience into
lively debate.

As a mark of the true interdisciplinary nature of these
conferences, the final afternoon had a range of papers from the
straightforwardly philosophical synthetic examination of
causation by Lars-Göran Johansson to a paper on the
coordination of flexible education by Elvy Westlund to an
intriguing discussion of the oriental approach to the philosophy
of information provided by Liu Gang. Whether deliberative or
not, Gang’s paper, which has been heavily influenced by
Leibniz, brought us full circle to the Leibniz we had heard
about from Chaitin in the first keynote address. Perhaps we
will find that the twenty-first-century metaphysics that
surounds digital philosophy and information theory will owe
a great debt to the speculative metaphysics of the seventeenth
and that it is mistaken, after all, to forget our history.

The conference drew to a close on Saturday afternoon
when all of those remaining who still had some energy retired
to Bondstorget for beer, light conversation, and to toast Gordana
for having done a splendid job as Program Chair for E-CAP05.
other was at the Central Division meeting, sponsored by the International Association for Computing and Philosophy and moderated by Marvin Croy.

The presence of computer assisted and online teaching of philosophy can no longer be ignored, and, so, Patrick Suppes (Stanford University), Marvin Croy (University of North Carolina—Charlotte), Peter Boltuc (University of Illinois—Springfield), Royce Jones (University of Illinois—Springfield), John Barker (University of Illinois—Springfield), Keith Miller (University of Illinois—Springfield), Ewa Bogusz-Boltuc (Warsaw University), and Patrick Manfredi (Southern Illinois University–Carbondale) decided to give this topic some serious attention. First, I will try to sum up presentations referring to teaching philosophy online and, next, to blended learning. Finally, I will hazard some suggestions for the future of online education of philosophy.

Presentations by Barker and Boltuc were devoted to the general outlook on teaching philosophy online.

There is still a great deal of skepticism about the very idea of teaching philosophy online. To dispel them, John Barker presented some of his recent experiences with online, with an eye toward answering the skeptic. Philosophy can be taught well in an online mode, provided the right model is employed, according to Barker. The secret lies in fostering philosophical discussion in the virtual classroom. Not only is this possible, the online medium actually offers certain advantages in this regard, as well, admittedly, as certain limitations that must be managed.

The results at the University of Illinois–Springfield (UIS) are very encouraging so far, so much so that the Philosophy Department feels comfortable delivering an entire bachelors degree in philosophy online. Actually, the authors of all contributions pertaining directly to teaching philosophy online at those two sessions (in addition to Barker, also Boltuc, Bogusz-Boltuc, Miller, and Jones) happen to be associated with the Philosophy Department at UIS.

According to Peter Boltuc, the emergence of online teaching has caught most philosophers by surprise, and general reluctance to offer advanced online classes is one of the main dangers to the profession. Students move online in large numbers, and if they do not find good philosophy electives on the Web, they take another subject. This is true even about whole degrees.

Insufficient online presence of philosophy programs is one of the main challenges to the profession in the early twenty-first century, as it puts jobs, salary, thereby, indirectly even high-power graduate programs, in jeopardy. Boltuc worked to initiate an online BA in philosophy at UIS, which is now operational.1

It is important to acknowledge a number of challenges to teaching philosophy online, but the online environment provides great opportunities not only for nontraditional students; it can be an exquisite tool for teaching advanced classes and for research. So, online classes may be developed on every level of academic teaching, graduate and postgraduate, advanced seminars included.

Presentations by Miller and Bogusz-Boltuc were devoted to particular issues in online pedagogy.

Keith Miller, who teaches computer ethics and other classes online, emphasized intertwined pedagogical and technical telecommunications concerns as we explore the possibilities of teaching online. Miller explored the advantages and disadvantages of different asynchronous and synchronous teaching techniques online. The term “synchronous” refers to techniques that require people to be online at the same time. “Asynchronous” techniques allow people to participate at different times in the same activity. Asynchronous activities can include time constraints, but the activity is synchronized by the calendar, not by simultaneous participation. Just as in face-to-face classrooms, different teaching styles are best for individual professors, and different learning styles are best for individual students. Miller brought up the following list of various teaching techniques applicable to online teaching:

I. SOME ASYNCHRONOUS TECHNIQUES

A. Techniques Centered on the Instructor (“Sage on the Stage Model”)
B. Techniques Designed for Interaction
C. Infusing New Material
D. Tools for Facing Students
E. Assessment Tools
F. Student Presentations

II. SOME SYNCHRONOUS TECHNIQUES

A. Webcast Lectures
B. Electronic Office Hours
C. Instant Messaging One-on-One or Many-to-Many
D. Webcam Office Hours or Small Student Groups

Miller ended with a practical reminder that we should be aware that high bandwidth requirements may exclude some students from certain online activities.

Ewa Bogusz-Boltuc discussed online teaching of philosophy. In her words: “It is fashionable among online educators to focus mainly on student centered pedagogy, and very often this ‘constructivist approach’ seems to go too far. Many theoreticians of online education flamboyantly dismiss the relevance of the content of the class for teaching and learning pedagogy. They claim that online learning is not about content communication—it’s about interaction.” Bogusz-Boltuc believes that online classes are, in themselves, not about interaction but that what matters is the content provided in dialogical style. However, while delivering the content in an online classroom—which lacks nonverbal messages and impromptu questions—we need to particularly take care of the ways we communicate. Certain channels of communication between an instructor and students, and also among students, should be established. These channels, created in the virtual space, convey the content of the class. For example, in teaching Aesthetics, one should focus not only on keeping the threaded discussion as the center point of the class but also on such activities as organizing the virtual trips to various museum websites worldwide, establishing the Art Café forum for informal communication about current art events, or inviting a recognized artist to participate in the class discussion. All those activities could animate student interest and create synergies between the abstract concepts of philosophy and the tangible art-world.

Since online teaching is still a new form of education, student assessment and course evaluation are quite important. Assessment should be perceived as an ongoing process performed throughout the course. According to Bogusz-Boltuc, assessment should be treated as a part of the instruction process, which helps to intensify the interaction between students and the instructor. Through various feedbacks not only do we diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of student learning but we can also evaluate, and consequently adjust, the instruction.

Presentations by Manfredi, Suppes and Croy were devoted to various issues in blended learning (using Web-based techniques in on-campus classes).

Pat Manfredi, one of the pioneers of teaching philosophy online, claims that the dichotomy between distance teaching and on-campus teaching is a false one. Blended teaching incorporates many distance-teaching techniques into on-
campus teaching, especially those that do not rely on Web pages. On-campus students spend a considerable amount of time connected to the Internet, and distance students do not do course work only when connected to the Internet. Effective teaching needs to combine elements from both domains.

Regardless of whether a course is being delivered on campus or over the Internet, the course syllabus should be designed and used as a digital document, according to Manfredi. It should include links to the instructor’s email address, home page, and the department’s home page as well as to sites where texts are available for online purchase. More important for the course content are links to supplemental materials: readings, interviews, blogs, lectures, conference proceedings, the library catalogue, etc. The Web can also be used for delivery of course materials, especially those that are not primarily text-based. Manfredi requires paperless submission of class materials since such submissions have many attractive features, such as tracking suggestions to earlier drafts and discovering plagiarism. Sophisticated paperless grading sites are available through Wadsworth and TurnItIn, but the Track Changes and Reviewing features of Microsoft Word to mark the assignments are also of help.

Manfredi discussed Web-based threaded discussion groups, which are a useful addition to many courses since they offer several distinct advantages: (1) they allow dialogue without an instructor’s continual presence; (2) multiple discussions can proceed simultaneously; (3) they permit discussions to continue throughout a semester; (4) they give a voice to students who are reluctant to speak in class; (5) they provide an environment where student comments can be more thoughtfully and more thoroughly developed; and, finally, (6) they encourage students to write for and to communicate with their peers rather than only with the professor. Yet, according to Manfredi, threaded discussion groups are no substitute for face-to-face discussions, and these cannot easily be reproduced through the Internet. Chat room environments share three features of classroom discussions: (1) they effectively engage students; (2) they allow multiple synchronous participation; and (3) they offer a quick response time. The problem is that most chat environments are text-based. This usually limits chat exchanges to phrases or short sentences and makes chatting with several individuals nearly impossible. Hence, Manfredi concludes that hosting an open chat session is nothing like moderating an in-class discussion.

This last claim has been challenged in discussion by several enthusiasts of online teaching. It was pointed out that new tools are on the market that allow for an easy two-way voice and (with broadband) also two-way visual communication.

In his paper “Teaching Computer-based Logic and Probability from Kindergarten to 12th Grade” Patrick Suppes, who, among his other achievements, is the director and faculty advisor of the Education Program for Gifted Youth at Stanford, explained how computers have been helping talented youth learn fast and earn credit. In his presentation, Suppes concentrated on classes in mathematics (and logic) offered from elementary-level all the way to Advanced Placement (AP) and university-level classes. We can learn a lot from those online courses for on-campus learning. Suppes focused on the issue of visualization provided by computer-based learning programs that cannot be replaced by any classroom-based techniques and therefore serve as valuable learning aids in a blended learning environment. Suppes also discussed the high dimensionality of students’ individual differences in performance. Those various dimensions can be caught, for instance, on simple logic tests, and then a human tutor, or a computer, can provide students with specialized exercises, or other study materials, aimed at that particular deficiency.

The issue of detection of individualized learning patterns, and associated problems in Web-based logic programs, was also an important topic of Marvin Croy’s presentation devoted to “Teaching On-Line Courses to On-Campus Students.” He argues that both online and on-campus classes have distinct advantages and disadvantages (for traditional classes, the main disadvantage is sparse hand-graded homework). Hybrid classes allow the learners to benefit from in-class demonstrations and practices specific to traditional classes and from intensive online assignments specific to online classes.

Croy presents continuous Web-based assessment as empirical support of the thesis that blended classes include many of the best elements of both learning environments. This is supported by test scores, average gain scores, student attitude measurements, and dropout rates. Croy concludes that teaching online classes to on-campus students may be a solution to some problems (for instance, with campus space) and that they seem best for a certain type of self-disciplined students, but that blended classes, even with shorter class times, seem like the best option for most students.

To sum up those two sessions, it is my hope that they are just the beginning of serious discussions of the issue of online education in philosophy. The issue reaches far beyond the traditional problems of teaching, and it is too important to be left to the limited group of philosophers focused on teaching philosophy or specialists in the philosophy of education. As a matter of fact, it should not be left to any sub-group of the philosophical community, although philosophers who feel comfortable using computers are a natural constituency. Online education is not just one more teaching method; rather, it creates a new kind of college (similar to, say, public land-grant universities), and it would be rather detrimental to any academic discipline to refrain from treating this new kind of college very seriously and from encouraging some of its best minds to work in that environment.

The two sessions gave us a glimpse of what can be done online and how the methods specific to online learning can enhance on-campus education. There are many distinct models of teaching online, from pre-recorded traditional lectures through computer-assisted programs to teach logic and discussion-rich classes all the way to real-time advanced research seminars that bring together people from various states and continents. The right question is not whether philosophy can be taught well online but whether professional philosophers are ready to do this.

Both sessions resulted in an animated discussion about perspectives of teaching philosophy on the Web (both within online and blended teaching modes). Participants agreed to exchange information and perhaps to initiate a blog devoted to online education in philosophy. Interested persons are encouraged to contact Peter Boltuc for further information.

Endnotes

1. Departmental website: http://www.uis.edu/philosophy/curriculum/major.htm