

Assessment 2021-22

Philosophy

Core D1, D3: Hybrid and Online. (The Philosophy Dept. offers both a major and minor; for

AY 21-22 we are assessing a select group of core D1, D3 courses)

Assessment Team

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Mission Statement of the Philosophy Department

Current Mission Statement of the Philosophy Major:

The mission of the B.A. in Philosophy degree program is to provide students with an excellent grounding in the fundamental subjects, key movements, and central figures in the history of philosophy and in ethics. We emphasize the development of superior reading, writing, critical thinking, and logic. We prepare students for a wide variety of careers, including entry into various postgraduate and professional degree programs. Our students and faculty are diverse. Consonant with the University's mission, the department educates men and women for others.

Current Mission Statement of the Philosophy Minor:

The mission of the Minor in Philosophy degree program is to provide students with an excellent grounding in the fundamental subjects, key movements, and central figures in the history of philosophy and in ethics. We emphasize the development of superior reading, writing, and critical thinking. Our students and faculty are diverse. Consonant with the University's mission, the department educates men and women for others.

Core Learning Outcomes (in lieu of PLO's since we are assessing select core courses)

CORE D1:

Students will be able to:

- Understand the value of thinking philosophically by reflecting on the meaning of one's own life, the conceptual foundations of human actions and beliefs, the nature of the self and of human responsibility.
- Understand and discuss coherently the central philosophical

issues, such as the problem of evil, the existence of God, free will, the mind/body relation, human knowledge, and the question of being.

- Demonstrate an ability to identify and articulate, both orally and in writing, the primary philosophical themes and issues found in the writings of the major philosophers.
- Demonstrate an ability to evaluate philosophical arguments critically, both orally and in writing, using philosophical methods that have been developed by either historical or contemporary philosophers.

CORE D3

Students will be able to:

- Identify and articulate central ethical problems concerning equality, justice, and rights, and understand the role these play in personal and professional life.
- Compare and contrast major ethical theories, to show how actions can be determined to be just or unjust, right or wrong, or good or bad, and to demonstrate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of major ethical theories.
- Investigate ways of settling ethical disputes in arriving at ethical judgments.
- Think and write critically about classic and contemporary moral issues.
- Identify the contributions of diversity and recognize the challenge that it presents in resolving contemporary ethical issues.
- Demonstrate an ability to apply ethical theories and values in personal decision-making.

The above reflects no changes to: Mission Statement; PLOs; Curricular Map

Assessment Schedule

In our 2018-2019 assessment report we wrote:

For a program such as Philosophy, which has, over the years, completed a full round of assessment of *all its key core LO's* (D1, D3) and *all PLO's*, we see no value at this point at simply repeating the process as we had it (with direct assessment of PLO's etc.). We are hence asking to be granted a period of more general time for reflection on the major and minor as we have it, rather than being pushed into a "repeat" process of which we do not see the additional value. We gather that our question is a valuable question not just for Philosophy, but for all programs which have completed their assessment cycles.

We did have an APR in Spring 2022. We should, then between 2023-2029, carry out another full round of assessment of core D1 and D3 LO's as well as all PLO's for the major and the minor.

Philosophy Assessment Plan for the 2021-22 report

We have in recent years carried out a thorough assessment of the major and minor components of the Philosophy program. Our past assessments demonstrate the consistent quality and success of our programming for majors and minors. We have thus decided to engage in a reflective assessment of two kinds of core course currently taught in our department: the online courses, designed and implemented under the auspices of the SOCCI (Summer Online Core Course Initiative), and a more informal and experimental course (approved by Associate Dean Jeff Paris) that is in the main taught in person, but also has a weekly asynchronous component specifically dedicated to writing assignments, including discussion boards, in order to motivate students' active engagement with and response to course lecture and reading.

Our reason for looking specifically at these courses is two-fold. First, because we deliver so many core courses (all the required D1s, and a majority of the D3s), our department has been encouraged the Dean's Office to develop both kinds of course. For example, we have three FT faculty teaching the SOCCI courses, and at least three PT faculty who are applying to do so (with training in S23). It seems appropriate to us to begin to compare student learning in these kinds of course with the exclusively in-person core classes taught by our department. Second, and this reason builds on the first, we neither have received instruction or guidance about how to assess these courses, nor, in the case of the SOCCI

courses, does the department have the means to weigh in on the design, content, or assignments in such courses. We think it very important to begin exploring methods of assessment by our department, which is what we are undertaking in this year's assessment report. We are especially keen to ensure that online courses adhere to the department's specific policies for student engagement and writing assignments.

Method of Assessment

For both kinds of course, we use indirect methods of assessment. For the in-person courses with asynchronous content we designed a survey to administer to students prior to the end of the semester. The survey is designed specifically to get student feedback about how well the asynchronous content/assignments help meet the LO's, encourage student engagement and increase student knowledge. We used the language of the course evaluations that students complete at the end of the term. We also gathered samples of the asynchronous assignments and the responses by students. We thus have three elements for the assessment: the instructors' asynchronous assignments, samples of the students' completed assignments, and the students' responses concerning their learning asynchronously.

For the online courses, we took a two-pronged approach. We designed a survey that the instructors of the online courses completed. We framed questions designed to gather their reflections on how online classes differ, and how significant such differences might be, from in person classes, particularly with respect to meeting LO's, student engagement and participation, and academic dishonesty. We asked for samples of the major assignment for each online course (that is, the instructors' assignments not the students' completed work).

We are typing that assignment to one of the LO's for that type of core course (D1, D3). For purposes of comparison, we also asked for the instructors' in-person syllabi corresponding to the online versions of the course.

We are including the instructor surveys, as well as a breakdown of the averages of the student responses for each of the four sections of the classes with asynchronous content.

Courses with Asynchronous Content

These courses originated, in 2018, with PT instructor Stephen Friesen's development of asynchronous modules to deliver in the event of disasters such as wildfires, then the pandemic. Stephen worked with ETS to integrate his technology training into his classes. Stephen developed online video lectures, graded discussion pages on Canvas, and Canvas assessment activities that ensured students participated in all the online activities.

Stephen's long-term goal has been, in his own words, "to continue to produce 2 class periods of online materials/activities for a few more semesters, until an acceptable safety net of prepared content is established to mitigate against the risks of future cancellations." To ensure further perfection of the modules, Stephen has subjected his activities to rigorous student feed-back.

PT instructor Richie Kim also developed an asynchronous component for the two core courses he regularly teaches (PHIL 110 and PHIL 244). In gaining permission of the Associate Dean to teach this, Richie wrote:

"I call them Weekly Discussion Posts & Reactions. And I make them 25% of their course grade. Here I'll provide the instructions I give them, and also a sample from my GPQ class and another sample from my Ethics class. Many (shy) students have told me how much they

value the opportunity to carefully consider and respond to a question on the discussion board outside of the pressures of having to ask or comment during the live class. And they get to react to at least one other student's post. It's been really great! But it is time consuming, which is why I counted it as an asynchronous replacement of the Friday meeting.”

1. Assessment Methodology and Results— Specifically for Stephen Friesen’s PHIL 244-01 and PHIL 205-01 and Richie Kim’s PHIL 240-05 and PHIL 11-03.

One significant challenge in online teaching is how to create and assess asynchronous assignments and activities. The philosophy department’s current assessment of entirely or partly online courses has two components, one of which is the review of asynchronous assignments and activities in four in-person courses in fall 2022. The methodology used for this portion of the assessment is an indirect review based on (1) instructor-selected assignment samples and instructor commentary and (2) student surveys. The instructors and courses are the following: Stephen Friesen’s PHIL 244-01 (Environmental Ethics) and PHIL 205-01 (Philosophy of Biology) and Richie Kim’s PHIL 240-05 (Ethics) and PHIL 110-03 (Great Philosophical Questions). Two of these courses are Core D1, and two are Core D3.

To offer context for the student surveys, we briefly describe two samples, one from each instructor, of asynchronous assignments. To produce a substantive online but asynchronous discussion, Professor Richie Kim uses Canvas’s discussion function to post a compelling question and requests students to reply to it and to one another. In PHIL 240, he asks students to weigh in on a philosophical argument that opposes cosmetic enhancement procedures, and he adds a startling example of an actual USF student who had been gifted an opportunity to get a “nose job” and who pondered whether to accept it or not. The

ensuing discussion by students was both an actual discussion, of course not in live time, and substantive. In PHIL 110, Richie describes the case of Daniel Kish, a person who has developed a bio-echolocatory sense, and asks student to speculate about whether humans generally can develop further senses beyond the typical five, like Kish did. This is a difficult question to reply to, but the case is interesting and elicited some conjectures from students. In both cases, Richie seemed to engage student thinking and interest.

Professor Stephen Friesen's development of asynchronous content was highly involved and may offer a model for many instructors. He designed a Philosophy of Biology course that builds asynchronous projects consistently and with explicit intention into his course modules. For example, a course module devoted to the book, *Metazoa*, featured audio-presentations of the book material to diversify the learning format, visual aids to clarify and animate key concepts and references in the book, and response questions for each chapter of the book that would potentially re-appear in later exams and thus increase the stakes and engagement with them. Stephen reports that this course earned him his highest evaluation and that the course module on *Metazoa* was his students' favorite part of the class.

Richie's style of online discussion forums and Stephen's *Metazoa* course module offer reference points for the student survey. The survey consists of seven questions taken from the regular course evaluations and adapted to asynchronous content and activities. The first three focus on clarity regarding learning outcomes, student responsibilities, and assessment criteria. A fourth is on the instructor's constructive feedback. And the final three concern the impact of the asynchronous activities on interest, knowledge, and transferability to other subjects. As the tallies indicate, students in all four courses gave consistently high

marks for the asynchronous elements of the course. On six of the seven questions, over 86% or more of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the asynchronous elements were pedagogically effective, and four of these six were in the 90% range. The only one that did not reach these numbers, and it concerned instructor's constructive feedback, still had 74% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that the feedback was constructive. This is an impressive showing. Richie and Stephen's assignment samples, when viewed just by themselves, seem to offer promising pedagogy, but the survey tallies offer strong evidence that students have a positive learning experience with the asynchronous content in these courses.

Action Item

Consider these instructors' asynchronous components as a model for other courses.

Follow up with instructors to find out what they do in terms of providing feedback to students on the asynchronous assignments.

Summer (and Intersession) Online Core Courses

Besides the courses with an asynchronous component (discussed above) we also started an initial assessment of the summer and intersession core courses which are offered fully asynchronous. Planning for these courses started in 2016, well before the pandemic, and currently we have 3 full time instructors in the department offering these courses. We decided it was a good moment to start assessing these fully asynchronous courses. Students seem to enjoy the flexibility these courses provide (although classes were enrolled just over 50%). Future assessment efforts can further look into this. For this initial round we wanted to have a more general reflection on the nature of these courses and how (and if) Learning Outcomes can be assessed in future assessment projects.

1. Assessment Methodology and Results: SOCCI developed online courses.

Part of our method of assessment consisted of comparing the syllabi of the same instructor for the online and the in-person classes. This was a fruitful exercise that immediately led to some important findings:

- Instructors tend to give more small assignments for the online version of their course. Those assignments are typically short and involve the discussion board. Some of these involve multiple choice quizzes, which are not given in the in-person course.
- The online courses are entirely asynchronous with no synchronous content whatsoever. Students have the option to meet the instructor by making an appointment, but there are no scheduled synchronous meetings whatsoever.

While the written parts of the course can be assessed in the same way we would assess an in person course, the second point above indicates that the following two LO's are not met:

For D1

LO3. Demonstrate an ability to identify and articulate, both orally and in writing, the primary philosophical themes and issues found in the writings of the major philosophers.

LO 4. Demonstrate an ability to evaluate philosophical arguments critically, both orally and in writing, using philosophical methods that have been developed by either historical or contemporary philosophers.

And for D3:

LO 4 Think and write critically about classic and contemporary moral issues.

In the D1 LO's the word "orally" is particularly standing out. Without any meetings the ability evaluate, identify, and/or articulate philosophical themes and arguments orally cannot be assessed.

While for the D3 course we can perhaps to some degree assess the "thinking" that occurs through online discussion boards, the LO explicitly separates thinking from writing similar to how the D1 learning outcomes distinguish "orally and in writing." The department's intent behind separating speaking and writing is that some of the skills students develop in philosophy classes involve on the spot thinking that occurs in life discussions in the classroom (or in online synchronous meetings) or in groupwork. Likewise, our students learn to engage with peers in collectively interpreting a challenging philosophical passage, or they put ideas into words while speaking. These skills cannot be assessed in the asynchronous format and we assume they are not developed.

One instructor reports insufficient time during the Spring semester (with a 3 course teaching load plus service work) to develop adequately the videos for the online course. This should be addressed by the Dean's Office.

We also note that one instructor's online and in person course does not conform to a department requirement to have a longer writing assignment that allows students to engage critically with philosophical arguments. The policy states:

At minimum, either a critical paper of 1500+ word count (roughly 6-7 pages) or two papers of 750+ word count each, one of which must be a critical paper, shall be assigned. These cannot

be take-home exams. It is the Department's considered opinion that Learning Outcomes can be satisfied only by critical papers of a certain length and that allow time for the building of ideas and editing of language. As far as papers go, this is a minimum, so more papers of varying lengths may be assigned.

The assessment of the SOCCI online courses provides us with an opportunity to review department policies as well as core course Los with all faculty at the start of each semester.

Action Item

We need further consultation with those running the SOCC initiative to find out what, if anything, replaces active discussion in the classroom. The department should meet to discuss whether philosophy can be taught successfully without classroom discussion, where the instructor is present and correcting, building on, or otherwise responding to student discussion.

We will also discuss reviewing D1/D3 syllabi to make sure all courses conform to the department's policy on requiring longer writing assignments.