UITL Teaching Grant Summary

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Synopsis

This grant was devoted to supporting a series of teaching workshops for graduate students during the 2019-20 academic year. These workshops were organized by a committee of graduate students under the supervision of the Director of Graduate Studies. The workshop committee reached out to several experienced teachers in the Philosophy Department (lecturers and advanced graduate students) to lead the following workshops:

Aug. 16: Teaching Orientations for New Instructors and GTAs (Evan Thomas)

Sept. 16: Active Learning Classroom Techniques (Joshua Smart)

Oct. 14: Diversifying Syllabi (Lavender McKittrick-Sweitzer)

Nov. 25: Teaching Introduction to Logic, or Logic and Legal Reasoning (Eric De Araujo)

Feb. 3: Assessment Design (Erin Mercurio)

March 2: Teaching Engineering Ethics (Michael Bertrand)

Post closure: Teaching Online (Andre Curtis-Trudel)

The general purpose of the workshops was (i) to provide teacher training for specific courses commonly taught by graduate students in the philosophy department, and (ii) to provide a forum for sharing advice on general pedagogical issues, including teaching techniques, syllabus design, and course assessment. Each two-hour session consisted of an hour-long presentation and discussion over light refreshments. Our aim has been to use the existing expertise in our community of graduate students and lecturers to help all our graduate students develop the skill-sets needed to achieve excellence in teaching.

Following university closure in Spring 2020, all in-person meetings were cancelled, and the remaining funds were used to assign a departmental liaison (Andre Curtis-Trudel) to assist with the department’s transition to virtual instruction.

Overview of Workshops

Workshop leaders summarize their workshops as follows.

**Teaching Orientations for New Instructors and GTAs**

In the fall of 2019, Evan Thomas conducted two teaching workshops in conjunction with Declan Smithies, the Director of Graduate Studies: one for graduate students newly appointed to grading or teaching assistant duties, and the other for graduate students teaching their own classes for the first time. These workshops were intended to introduce new instructors to some best practices and to prompt reflection and discussion on pedagogy.

The first workshop began with some general advice on grading and giving feedback to students. Evan distributed an anonymized writing assignment submitted in a course he had previously taught. Workshop attendees were asked to assign a grade and to provide some feedback on the assignment, which prompted some more general discussion of various different techniques for approaching evaluation and feedback. Next, Evan asked attendees to jot down their thoughts about two questions: (i) What are the main aims of a recitation section? And (ii) what techniques or methods best meet these aims? This prompted more general discussion on the topic of leading recitations. Evan also shared resources and recommendations for best practices relevant to evaluation, feedback, and leading recitation sections.

Evan began the second workshop by asking attendees to articulate the general aims of their classes and the areas in which they most hope to develop as instructors. Next, attendees performed an exercise in which they were asked to give a short introductory presentation on the first topic of their prepared syllabus. The group provided feedback for each attendee and Evan facilitated a discussion on teaching prompted by the exercise. Subsequently, each attendee shared the syllabus they had prepared for their course. The group provided feedback for each syllabus and Evan facilitated a discussion on topics such as attendance policy, assignment load and structure, etc. Evan also shared resources and best practices relevant to syllabus design and general instruction.

**Session 1: Active Learning**

This workshop focused on active teaching and learning. We discussed some of the supporting research in cognitive science and education, as well as sharing best practices, and ideas for implementation. One goal was to examine various methods for going beyond the traditional "sage on the stage" classroom model. For these, we looked at key features to consider when choosing a method. We broke them down by the number of participants--e.g. individuals, pairs, small groups--types of strategies--e.g. preparation, backchanneling, metacognition--and the learning techniques employed--e.g. retrieval practice, elaboration, dual processing. So, for example, in the workshop we did a preparation activity called "Lightning Round" in which rotating pairs discussed reasons for and against including more active learning strategies in the classroom, and, at the end, individuals engaged in retrieval practice as part of a metacognitive activity called an "Exit Ticket.

**Session 2: Diversifying Syllabi**

During this workshop, graduate students shared and discussed concrete ways that teachers can remove some of the barriers to pursuing philosophy that are typically faced by members of minority and underrepresented groups. The primary goal was to identify various methods each of us can implement when designing and teaching our courses so that we can make substantial progress towards building a more diverse and inclusive philosophical environment.

The methods we discussed included: (i) diversifying one’s assigned reading list to include minority voices, (ii) actively cultivating inclusive classroom discussion, (iii) undermining the effects and persistence of stereotype threat, (iv) undermining negative stereotypes and bias about philosophy (what it is and who can do it), (v) grading anonymously when possible, and (vi) taking advantage of campus resources that support students in handling adversity that impedes their learning. These methods have been helpfully outlined for instructors here: <https://philosophy.osu.edu/guidelinesforinstructors>

**Session 3: Teaching Intro to Logic, and Logic and Legal Reasoning**

The goal of this workshop was to equip participants with the skills and resources to teach Introduction to Logic or Logic and Legal Reasoning. We started by reviewing the learning goals of the course and its role as a GE in the university curriculum. After a brief overview of the principles of backward design, participants identified learning goals, expected learning outcomes, objectives, and sample activities to meet those outcomes. Following this, the participants collectively designed a sample lesson based on resources provided by the instructor for representing arguments as diagrams. We closed with some more general discussion of resources for teaching logic, including textbooks, and advice on how best to use Carmen to develop quizzes and other assignments.

**Session 4: Assessment Design**

This workshop focused on how to design more effective assignments and assessments in philosophy courses. It was structured around the idea of backward design, which participants had encountered in previous teaching workshops in the series. After reviewing backward design and how it might be applied in the context of designing assignments, we began with some individual reflection and group discussion about the big-picture goals that participants had for their students, as well as the specific things that they would like their students to be able to do at the end of the particular courses they were teaching. Together, we then worked to brainstorm some assessment formats, both creative and traditional, that would allow a student to show that they had met the goals of the course.

Choosing an appropriate format for assessing our students’ learning, however, is only the first step in designing our assignments and assessments in a way that will enable our students to meet the goals we have for them. So I then shared some research with the participants about student learning—including research which suggests that experts perform better than novices at complex tasks like writing an argumentative paper (despite not having any more processing power) because they have practiced and automated many of the component skills, as well as research on the importance of early and frequent feedback to help students fix their mistakes. We then discussed several ways of taking these facts about learning into account in the way we design our assignments, including scaffolding assignments to gradually introduce students to philosophical writing, opportunities for low-stakes or ungraded writing and critical thinking practice in the classroom, graded opportunities for reflection or redrafts in light of feedback on an exam or paper, etc.

To help participants think about what parts of an assignment might be scaffolded or supported by the instructor, and which students need to practice prior to assessment, participants at the workshop practiced dividing the task of writing a philosophy paper into component skills, then sorting these into categories based on whether they are difficult or easy for students and whether they are essential to the learning goals of the course. This helped us consider ways that we might write our assignments to help keep students from being distracted by parts of the task that are difficult for them, but not relevant to course goals (e.g., by helping them make decisions about organization/procedure, audience, disciplinary conventions, source citing, and by being transparent about the purpose of the assignment and how it will be evaluated). Finally, we discussed ways that we might help students practice and receive feedback on those skills which *are* relevant to course goals prior to a high-stakes assessment such as a graded academic essay. Before closing the workshop, I shared a typical series of scaffolded writing assignments I give in an introductory philosophy course, so that participants had an example of a scaffolded assignment to reference, as well as an example of the kinds of things I typically include in the instructions of an assignment I give to students.

Much of the research on student learning that I shared at this workshop, as well as some helpful resources for teaching like exam wrappers and sample rubrics, can be found in the book How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching (Susan A. Ambrose, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett, and Marie K. Norman). It is available as an e-book through OSU’s library or here: <https://firstliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/How-Learning-Works.pdf>

The booklet of writing activities that can be used for low-stakes critical thinking and writing practice, which I shared during the workshop, can also be found here: <https://cstw.osu.edu/sites/cstw.osu.edu/files/WritingtoLearnBookletv2016online.pdf>

**Session 5: Teaching Engineering Ethics**

Engineering Ethics is a challenging course to teach in part because philosophy instructors typically have little background experience with engineering. Because of this, it can be challenging to come up with an interesting curriculum that students will find helpful. In short, it’s hard to know where to start.

In light of this, the main goal of this workshop was to talk attendees through the course design process from top to bottom in order to discuss various choices I made and what alternatives might be available. Building on principles of backward design established in previous workshops, we started the workshop with a general conversation about audience and learning objectives. The general consensus was that one of main goals of the course is to help engineers to exercise moral agency when making decisions in their professional life.

I presented a particular way of designing a course around this objective. Mine is focused on understanding and critically evaluating the National Society of Professional Engineers’ Code of Engineering Ethics. We discussed the merits of this approach as compared to approaches that emphasize philosophy of technology and that emphasize business ethics for engineers.

I briefly described the major assessments in the course and explained, in terms of my course objectives, how I arrived at them. This allowed us to reflect on other means of assessment and to discuss the relative merits of exams and comprehension/knowledge questions (as opposed to application and evaluation questions) in this course. Finally, we talked through course activities looking through the lesson from a representative sample day in the class.

In addition to our discussion, I made available several resources including codes of professional engineering ethics for several subfields, the Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science, my syllabus, and the sample lesson we discussed, as well as some literature on course design and classroom assessment techniques.

**Session 6: Transition to Virtual Learning Support**

Instead of holding an in-person workshop on online teaching, I prepared a document outlining some advice and guidance for making the mid-semester transition to online teaching. I primarily drew on material provided by a week-long ODEE workshop on online teaching I attended in Summer 2019, although I also drew on materials from OSU's 'keep teaching' initiative, as well as other non-OSU online teaching resources (mainly academic blogs and the Carmen user forums). The document was organized in a 'question & answer' format, where concrete tips were provided to address specific questions. For instance, I provided some concrete suggestions about how to use various functions on Carmen modules to facilitate online teaching.

Going forward, I intend to keep the document 'live', in that I intend to add new resources to the document, as well as to expand on preexisting sections as we figure out what works, and what doesn't, now that we've moved entirely online. I also intend to add sections with concrete tips for teaching philosophy online, in particular. My hope is that the document will be a departmental resource that lasts beyond the immediate move online.

Feedback

After each workshop we distributed a survey for attendees to provide anonymous feedback on the event. This survey was based on a similar survey used at UITL beginning-of-the-year teaching orientation. Each question was answered on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The resulting data are summarized in the tables below.

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| --- | --- |
| **Question Key** | |
| Q1.a | I understand why mastering this skill is important for student learning |
| Q1.b | The workshop increased my understanding of the purpose of this course in our department |
| Q2 | The workshop gave me some concrete ideas, suggestion, or resources that I could incorporate into my own teaching practices |
| Q3 | The workshop topic helped meet my needs as a developing teacher |
| Q4 | The workshop helped me feel more confident in my ability to teach |
| Q5 | The workshop helped me feel connected to and supported by other teachers in the department |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Topic: | Active Learning | | Diversifying Syllabi | | Teaching Logic | | Assessment Design | | Teaching Engineering Ethics | |
|  | Avg. | Median | Avg. | Median | Avg. | Median | Avg. | Median | Avg. | Median |
| Q1.a | 4.73 | 5 | 4.53 | 5 | N/A | N/A | 4.92 | 5 | N/A | N/A |
| Q1.b | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 4.54 | 5 | N/A | N/A | 4.87 | 5 |
| Q2 | 4.81 | 5 | 4.61 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4.92 | 5 | 4.73 | 5 |
| Q3 | 4.43 | 5 | 4.61 | 5 | 4.63 | 5 | 4.92 | 5 | 4.60 | 5 |
| Q4 | 4.18 | 4 | 4.07 | 5 | 4.54 | 5 | 4.76 | 5 | 4.80 | 5 |
| Q5 | 4.31 | 4,5 | 4.61 | 5 | 4.54 | 5 | 4.69 | 5 | 4.80 | 5 |

These surveys also left room for discursive feedback. The following list summarizes the main points attendees made in this section.

* It was beneficial to see concrete examples of teaching materials (syllabuses, lesson plans, assignment prompts, etc.) from experienced teachers.
* It was helpful that many presenters provided further resources related to their topic, as this gave attendees a way to follow up on the topic in the future.
* Some attendees would have liked to see more diverse examples of approaches to teaching, such as multiple syllabuses or lesson plans from different teachers, in order to see how different people approach the same topic.
* The workshops helped nicely break down each topic into small, manageable pieces that could be directly implemented.
* Some workshops were lecture-heavy and could have benefitted from more discussion or other active learning tools.

At the end of each session we encouraged attendees to identify one concrete idea from the workshop that they would implement in their own teaching. Overall, the workshops were well-attended, and participants reported finding them helpful as a source of ideas and tips for improving their teaching. The practical orientation of the workshops was much appreciated, with attendees identifying many different ideas to implement in their own teaching.

Potential Improvements

For this series of workshops, we aimed to cover a variety of topics that would best support graduate student instructors through all parts of instruction, from course design and syllabus creation, through lesson planning and class management, to assessment and feedback. While we were generally pleased with the result, and think it was valuable to cover this wide range of components of instruction, the range of topics necessarily meant that each workshop was just an introduction to the skills and issues. In the future, we see value in expanding the workshop programming with sequences of workshops each focused on a single topic. This would have several benefits, allowing us to continue the conversation in further depth. One possible format we would consider in the future is a workshop on a specific teaching skill or practice, followed two weeks later by an informal discussion where attendees recount their experiences and lessons learned in implementing the skills from the previous workshop.

By convening to discuss experiences and lessons learned in practicing a given skill in our own instruction, we would be able to learn from our successes and failures. This would allow us to better synthesize and evaluate the goals and implementation of these teaching skills. Reflecting on and discussing our experiences will enable a further discussion of the challenges and obstacles to implementing these skills and practices in the classroom.

This approach would also help to address some of the shortcomings that participants identified in their feedback on the current workshops. An informal discussion session would foster a more interactive environment and combat the tendency for a workshop to fall into a lecture-style presentation by the workshop leader. Additionally, the more interactive nature of such a discussion session would give voice to a variety of experiences and approaches different people take to instruction. This would give a window into different styles of teaching and different ways implementing the skills practiced. Observing how different people approach the same task can be inspiring for teachers, and will allow each person to find the approach that best suits their own personal teaching style.

Dissemination

Over the course of the workshop series, presenters researched strategies for effective teaching and reflected on their own best teaching practices to draw some conclusions about how to teach philosophy effectively. The result was that graduate instructors who attended the workshops were provided with a wealth of knowledge, resources, and support to help them with their teaching. We plan to disseminate the findings of the workshop series to the larger teaching community at Ohio State in a few ways.

First, we plan to continue collecting resources for teaching and online teaching at our graduate resources page linked below: <https://philosophy.osu.edu/graduate-student-resources>

Second, we plan to post summaries of each workshop, together with resources provided by presenters, on this page. This will provide additional resources for those who attended the workshops as well as those (including faculty and new graduate students) who were unable to attend the workshops. It will also provide ideas and direction for future workshops.

Third, we plan to post a news story on our department website – which will also be shared on Facebook and Twitter - summarizing the activities supported by the UITL grant during this academic year and linking to our graduate resources page. This may bring our materials to a wider audience of students and instructors in philosophy. We would be delighted to share this news story with UITL.

Fourth, we plan to organize a series of teaching workshops next year building on our success this year.

We think this approach will target the audience most likely to benefit from them, since many of our findings relate to applying more general research on effective teaching to the subject of philosophy, to individual courses taught in the philosophy department at OSU, or to specific problems that one encounters when teaching philosophy. It will also serve as a way to foster conversation between graduate students and faculty in the philosophy department about effective teaching.

Workshop facilitators will also be encouraged to submit proposals for presenting their ideas at the annual UITL teaching conference, the UITL new teaching orientation, or at a regional teaching conference. This would allow facilitators to continue to reflect on their ideas about teaching with the help of constructive feedback from the broader Ohio State teaching community. It also allows them to disseminate the results of their hard work and research, and take ownership of and pride in their unique perspective as philosophy teachers.