

# **Discourse:**

Learning and Teaching in Philosophical  
and Religious Studies



**Discourse**  
**Learning and Teaching**  
**in Philosophical and Religious Studies**

(formally *The PRS-LTSN Journal*)

**Vol. 3, No. 1, Autumn 2003**

**Editor:** David J Mossley  
PRS-LTSN  
School of Theology and  
Religious Studies  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT  
United Kingdom  
+44(0)113 343 1166  
david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk

**Assistant Editors:** Martyn Fletcher and Danielle Lamb, PRS-LTSN

Distributed freely to all individuals and PRS departments in UK Higher Education and to those registered in our subject areas.

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# Discourse

## Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

(Formerly *The PRS-LTSN Journal*)

Volume 3, Number 1, Autumn 2003-4

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Welcome to the fifth issue of the journal for the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network

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## Contents

### *NEWS and INFORMATION*

The LTSN and the PRS-LTSN .....	7
Departmental Visits and Contacts .....	9
Other LTSN Subject Centres .....	10
Across the Network—TechDis .....	12
Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL5) .....	17
LTSN ETHICS Project Event .....	20
Faith Guides for use in Higher Education .....	22
Forthcoming Event: “Religious Studies: What’s the Point” .....	25

### *ARTICLES and DISCUSSION*

Louise Jarvis and Joe Cain

<b>Web Projects in Undergraduate History of Science .....</b>	<b>27</b>
---	-----------

Nigel Taylor

<b>Teaching Philosophy to Non-Philosophy Students: The Example of Architecture and Town Planning .....</b>	<b>41</b>
--	-----------

Helen Beebee

<b>Introductory Formal Logic: Why do we do it? .....</b>	<b>53</b>
--	-----------

Zoë Bennett Moore, Lucia Faltin and Melanie Wright

<b>Critical Thinking and International Postgraduate Students .....</b>	<b>63</b>
--	-----------

Annamaria Carusi

<b>Taking Philosophical Dialogue Online .....</b>	<b>95</b>
---	-----------

Eleanor Jackson and Phillip Henry

<b>An Analysis of the use of Oral Presentations within the Religious and Philosophical Subject Area at the University of Derby 1996-2002 .....</b>	<b>157</b>
--	------------

Notes for Authors .....	215
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About <i>Discourse</i> .....	220
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## Editorial: Discourse

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Sharp-eyed readers will have noticed already that this journal has changed its name. We hope that you find *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* a more attractive and user-friendly title. Additionally, we have shifted our publication dates to better match teaching terms, with the slightly bizarre consequence that Vol. 2, No. 2 was published as the issue for “Winter 2003” while this is the issue for “Autumn 2003”. We hope that this minor temporal anomaly does not detract from your appreciation of *Discourse*.

We know from our recent survey that this journal is appreciated and generally very well-received. We thank you for your feedback. However, we also know that there is always room for improvement and invite comment and evaluative feedback on *Discourse* at any time.

As with previous issues we are continuing to publish a range of outputs and reports from funded projects we have supported over the last two years. Jarvis and Cain’s piece on the use of web-based projects in the history of science concludes their three part series of papers exploring alternative forms of assessment. The series is invaluable as a resource for anyone looking into alternative assessment methods either for the first time or as a seasoned developer of assessment techniques.

On curriculum matters Taylor gives a refreshing insight into philosophy teaching in a non-standard context that highlights some interesting features of philosophy for all students; while Beebe looks at logic teaching and uses her own experience to discuss what *really* works as the content of introductory logic modules, especially for groups that include students with a fear of symbolism as members.

Bennett Moore, Faltin and Wright describe the experience and needs of international students expected to pick up learning and critical analysis skills very early in their postgraduate studies. They discuss some ways in which they may be better supported.

Carusi provides a rich and thorough overview of issues in on-line teaching in philosophy. Her excellent article should prove a great deal of food for thought and serve as a definitive starting point for subject-specific discussions about e-learning and on-line teaching.

Jackson and Henry show us a rigorous analysis of the use of oral presentations in assessment at the University of Derby. Their insights into oral assessment will be useful to all readers who need clear evidence of its effectiveness and justification in their modules and programmes.

**Last, but far from least, we urge all PRS teaching academics to familiarise themselves with the forthcoming funding opportunities about to become available from HEFCE and DEL for institutions in England and Northern Ireland under the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, Phase Five (FDTL5). £7 million will be distributed to a range of pedagogical development projects and we hope that departments in philosophy and theology/religious studies will be in a position to benefit from this money. Please see page 17.**

All good wishes for a fruitful and rewarding Autumn/Michaelmas Term,

David J Mossley  
Editor

## **News and Information**

## The LTSN and the PRS-LTSN

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### LTSN

The Learning and Teaching Support Network is a network of 24 subject centres based in higher education institutions throughout the UK. It is funded by the four HE funding bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It aims to promote high quality learning and teaching through development and transfer of successful practice in all subject disciplines.

### Activities

The LTSN's core activities are:

- setting up, supporting and developing learning and teaching networks;
- promoting and sharing successful practice in learning, teaching and assessment through workshops, conferences, meetings and the interoperability of resources and databases of resources;
- facilitating the transfer of knowledge between users, experts, developers and innovators.

### The LTSN Generic Centre

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp>

There are also learning and teaching issues and practices common to all subjects that are disseminated and promoted by the LTSN Generic Centre, located in York. The Generic Centre is becoming a major national source of information and expertise on learning and teaching practices. It assists the subject centres, and HE providers generally, to make the best use of a wide range of approaches to learning and teaching, drawing on the expertise already present in HE.

### The PRS-LTSN

The Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre is based at the University of Leeds and at a partner site at the University of Wales, Lampeter and covers the disciplines of Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, History of Science (including the History of Medicine and Technology), Theology, and Religious Studies. The name 'Philosophical and Religious Studies' is merely an abbreviation for these subject areas.

## Activities

**The mission of the PRS-LTSN is to enhance teaching quality and improve the student learning experience for all in the context of a changing educational environment.**

More specifically, we aim:

- to be the accepted source of information and advice to PRS subject communities on subject-specific and relevant generic educational issues;
- to promote the discovery, development and brokering of good and innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment;
- to develop and maintain a national and international profile;
- to identify and disseminate current and future national policy objectives in learning and teaching and to assist departmental implementation where appropriate.

We provide the following services and resources:

- individual consultations;
- departmental visits;
- grants and funding for learning and teaching projects;
- a comprehensive website of electronic resources and reviews;
- *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious*;
- national and regional workshops and conferences.



## Departmental Visits and Contacts

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### Departmental Visits

We have now visited over three quarters of the departments in our subject communities. We have contacted all the departments (either via your departmental PRS-LTSN representative or your Head of Department) and if we have not yet set up a face to face meeting then please do not hesitate to contact us at the address below to arrange one. The aim of the visits is to gather information about existing effective practice and to find out what the most pressing issues for your department and for individual lecturers and tutors are, so that we can better direct our resources and efforts to serve the PRS community in all learning, teaching and assessment matters.

We are also beginning a programme of follow-up visits. These are designed to help us better help you with issues raised in our first visits and to see how things have changed in your learning and teaching environment.

We are open to invitations at any time. Ask your PRS-LTSN rep. (or HoD) for details.

### Contacts

Our list of departmental contacts continues to grow, but there is still a small minority of departments that have not registered a representative. If you would like to be a representative for your department, please contact:

Martyn Fletcher  
PRS-LTSN  
School of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Leeds  
Leeds  
LS2 9JT  
Tel: 0113 343 4184  
martyn@prs-ltsn.ac.uk

## Other LTSN Subject Centres

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- **Art, Design and Communication**  
University of Brighton  
<http://www.bton.ac.uk/adc-ltsn>
- **Bioscience**  
University of Leeds  
<http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Built Environment**  
Cardiff University  
<http://cebe.cf.ac.uk>
- **Business, Management and Accountancy (BEST)**  
University of East Anglia  
<http://www.business.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Economics**  
University of Bristol  
<http://www.economics.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Education (ESCALATE)**  
University of Nottingham  
<http://www.escalate.ac.uk>
- **Engineering**  
Loughborough University  
<http://www.ltsneng.ac.uk>
- **English**  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/ltsn/english/>
- **Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences**  
University of Plymouth  
<http://www.gees.ac.uk>
- **Health Sciences and Practice**  
King's College London  
<http://www.health.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **History, Classics and Archaeology**  
University of Glasgow  
<http://www.hca.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism**  
Oxford Brookes University  
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/ltsn>
- **Information and Computer Sciences**  
University of Ulster  
<http://www.ics.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies**  
University of Southampton  
<http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Law (UK Centre for Legal Education)**  
University of Warwick  
<http://www.ukcle.ac.uk>
- **Materials**  
University of Liverpool  
<http://www.materials.ac.uk>
- **Maths, Stats and OR Network**  
University of Birmingham  
<http://ltsn.mathstore.ac.uk>
- **Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine**  
University of Newcastle  
<http://www.ltsn-01.ac.uk>
- **Performing Arts (PALATINE)**  
Lancaster University  
<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/palatine>
- **Physical Sciences**  
University of Hull  
<http://www.physsci.ltsn.ac.uk>
- **Psychology**  
University of York  
<http://www.psychology.ltsn.ac.uk>

- **Sociology, Anthropology and Politics**  
University of Birmingham  
<http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk>

- **Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)**  
University of Southampton  
<http://www.swap.ac.uk>

**The LTSN Generic Centre**

The Network Centre

Innovation Close

York Science Park

Heslington

York

YO10 5ZF

Tel: 01904 754555, Fax: 01904 754599

Email: [gcnquiries@ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:gcnquiries@ltsn.ac.uk)

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/default.asp>

## Across the Network

(A new regular feature profiling the work of other support organisations in higher education and across the LTSN network)

### **TechDis**

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**T**he JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) TechDis service aims to improve provision for disabled staff and students in higher and further education through technology. Achieving this takes several routes. TechDis provides an advice and information resource via extensive web-based databases and an email helpdesk. These resources should be the first port of call for anyone in education who has a question relating to disability and technology.

**For more details visit:**

**<http://www.techdis.ac.uk>**

The TechDis staff also pursue outreach into the community by delivering presentations and facilitating workshops at cross-institutional events. Staff development workshops are held monthly on a range of issues relating to disability and technology in education. TechDis are also developing standalone staff development resources on a range of themes to enable particular issues to be discussed in more detail within institutions and departments.

**The following short discussion demonstrates the kind of information available from TechDis.**

## **“Disabled Students Should be Assessed in the Same Way as Their Non Disabled Peers. Discuss.”**

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In September 2001 the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) received royal assent amending existing anti-discrimination legislation to ensure that disabled students are treated equitably in relation to all aspects of their education, including learning, teaching and assessment. This short article examines some of the issues surrounding assessment and disabled students.

### **The Legislation**

Under the current legislation, it is unlawful for an institution to treat a disabled student ‘less favourably’ than their non-disabled peers for a reason which relates to the person’s disability. In order to prevent discrimination, ‘reasonable adjustments’ should be made by the institution. For example, if a student was required to complete an oral presentation, a reasonable adjustment would be to allow a deaf student to complete this presentation using a British Sign Language interpreter (DRC Code of Practice, 2002). The fair and equitable assessment of all students is at the core of SENDA and as such is a very important issue for all institutions.

In recent years there has been a shift in the ways that courses are assessed. Assessments have moved away from end of term written examinations testing what a student knows, or can remember, in the space of a few hours, towards a more continuous assessment approach where students are assessed via a combination of written examinations, practical assessments and other means. This change in assessment approach has benefited a large number of students by enabling them to display their abilities in a number of ways. In addition, there is the need to maintain a flexibility in assessment techniques to ensure that the needs of disabled students are met within all assessments, including essays and practical tests (McCarthy and Hurst, 2001).

### **Accessible Assessments**

The ways and means of making any given assessment accessible to all students can be as varied as the methods used to assess students. These range from small and simple adjustments, such as additional time in a written examination for a dyslexic student, to more substantial adjustments such as the use of CCTV and a word processor for a vision impaired student completing a written examination.

Below is just a small list of technologies that can be implemented within an institution to enable disabled students to complete an assessment.

- CCTV, page magnifiers and other visual aids;
- Word Processors;
- Computers equipped with specialist software such as screen readers;
- Braille papers and Braille output devices;
- Video cameras to enable students to give oral presentations from an external location;
- Timing aids to allow candidates to complete timed elements of assessments without assistance.

Many learners may require assistive technologies to allow them to complete an assessment. Without these technologies it may be difficult for students to complete courses, however, they do not always provide the entire solution. In a study of task completion via a VLE (Evans and Sutherland, 2003) it was shown that blind and vision impaired students, using a screen reader, spent only 30-40% of their time 'Doing' a task, such as completing a computer based quiz, compared to 70-80% for users using onscreen magnification or users needing no assistive technology. The remainder of the time was spent either 'using' the VLE or 'accessing' the required information. The use of a screen reader enabled the blind and vision impaired users to access the required material, but they were not working at a similar level (Ball and Wiles, 2003).

There may also be the need to employ some non-technological methods, for example the use of a British Sign Language interpreter to sign the questions in an oral examination to a student, the use of an amanuensis to transcribe a student's response to a question, or the use of an assistant to aid a student in a practical examination.

Each individual student will have specific needs which may influence the ways in which their assessment is undertaken. One approach is to negotiate with the disabled student, ensure the student understands the assessment process and then assess how they feel they can best undertake the task. However, it is imperative to ensure that any adaptations made to an assessment should in no way advantage or disadvantage any given student. The adaptation must ensure that the assessment outcomes are met at every given level, or if this is

unobtainable then a comparable assessment outcome should be considered.

### 'Design-for-All'

It is important to stress that as education in general becomes more inclusive there should be a move towards creating accessible assessments from the start of a course design process instead of having to change an assessment to accommodate a disabled student later. If staff were to adopt the 'Design-for-All' principle in relation to examinations and assessments, the need to amend and adapt procedures would be dramatically reduced (Ball and Wiles, 2003). The assistive technologies mentioned above can greatly assist a disabled student, but they cannot be expected to provide the solution independently.

Within Design-for-All principles there are a number of techniques that can be adopted to increase accessibility and usability for not only disabled students, but all students.

- Clear and defined language: It is imperative to ensure that all questions asked are clear in their objectives. There is no need to deliberately confuse students, this is against the principles of fair and rigorous assessment.
- Presentation: Ensuring that assessments are presented in a sans serif font, with adequate spacing between lines, can dramatically increase readability for all students.

More detailed information on European Design-for-All principles can be found at <http://www.design-for-all.org> .

With e-learning high on the government agenda, there has been a move towards Computer-Based Assessment (CBA) to allow students to be assessed with a range of differing techniques. As these techniques become more and more widespread, it is imperative that they are made accessible for all students. For example a piece of video should be captioned for deaf or hard of hearing students, or a transcript produced for vision impaired students. However, it may not be possible to ensure all modes of assessment are viable for all students. In this instance it is acceptable to provide an equivalent alternative assessment, as long as the assessment achieves the same outcomes and is of equal interest (Ball and Wiles, 2003).

## Towards Inclusion

Creating assessments that are accessible to all students should be a priority as anti-discrimination legislation is enforced. The process and methods that will be used during a student's time at university should be made explicit in course material so that students understand what will be expected of them. Additionally, policies and processes should be put in place that allow a certain amount of flexibility and adaptation to allow all students to be assessed 'on a level playing field'.

## References

- Ball, S., and Wiles, K. *Constructing Accessible CBA: Minor Works or Major Renovations?* CAA Conference proceedings, 8-9 July 2003, Loughborough  
Disability Discrimination Act 1995  
<http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts1995/1995050.htm>
- Disability Rights Commission: *Code of Practice for Providers of Post 16 Education and Related Services* (2002)  
[http://www.drc.org.uk/uploaded\\_files/documents/2008\\_187\\_DDA%20Pt4%20Code%20of%20Practice%20for%20Post%2016%20education.doc](http://www.drc.org.uk/uploaded_files/documents/2008_187_DDA%20Pt4%20Code%20of%20Practice%20for%20Post%2016%20education.doc)
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- Evans, S., and Sutherland A. (2003) *Virtual Learning Environment User Testing Project* TechDis and Royal National College for the Blind, Hereford.  
<http://www.techdis.ac.uk/resources/VLE2002.html>
- McCarthy, D., and Hurst, A. (2001) *A Briefing on Assessing Disabled Students* LTSN Generic Centre Assessment Series No 8.  
[http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/application.asp?app=resources.asp&process=full\\_record&section=generic&id=129](http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/application.asp?app=resources.asp&process=full_record&section=generic&id=129)
- Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.  
<http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm>

*Sue Harrison*  
TechDis



## Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL Phase Five)

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The Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

The Fund was established in 1995 to support projects aimed at stimulating developments in teaching and learning in higher education and to encourage the dissemination of good teaching and learning practice across the higher education sector. Since 1995, the Fund has supported 130 projects throughout HEFCE-funded institutions. Bids are invited from higher education institutions that demonstrate high quality in their educational provision (judged by the teaching quality assessment exercise) and in priority subject areas (determined by department subject review reports and analysis by the appropriate LTSN Subject Centres).

The areas of philosophy and theology/religious studies will be eligible in the next funding round,<sup>2</sup> Phase Five. There will be £7 million available in total. In the previous phase (Phase Four) projects were funded at the following levels:

- large-scale projects over a maximum of three years, with a maximum of £250,000 in total for each project. This scale of funding was restricted to consortium projects
- medium-scale projects over a maximum of three years, with a maximum of £150,000 in total for each project
- small-scale projects over a maximum of two years, with a maximum of £75,000 in total for each project.

Projects were funded following a two stage bidding process. It is anticipated that bids for FDTL Phase Five funding will be at the same

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<sup>1</sup> Institutions and individuals in Scotland and Wales may act as consultants to consortia (where they have unique expertise) in so far as they do not benefit directly from the development funding itself. Please check the published criteria for clarification or contact the PRS-LTSN.

<sup>2</sup> History and philosophy of science, technology and medicine departments or sections will also be covered by Phase Five and be eligible for funds if the last QAA Subject Review took place through the Philosophy Panel (or another subject area to be funded under Phase Five).

level of funding. At Stage One, departments and consortia will be required to demonstrate they have the research, developmental and project management capacity to support the proposed bid. Successful bids at Stage One will be developed in detail through to Stage Two where the final selection will be made. Consortia of departments are encouraged. Bids from philosophy and theology/religious studies departments can only be made via the PRS-LTSN, which will support departments through the bidding procedure. An announcement is expected from HEFCE in the near future. However, the time-scale available for submission of bids at Stage One will be short and departments intending to bid for funding are encouraged to begin planning now.

***The timetable for bids:***<sup>3</sup>

- By Friday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2003 – HEFCE circular published detailing bidding criteria
- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>15<sup>th</sup> October, Manchester/22<sup>nd</sup> October, London</b> – subject meetings for PRS communities: advice on the bidding procedure and requirements (details available from the PRS-LTSN)</li></ul> |
|---|
- **Midday Friday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2003** – Deadline for submission of Stage One applications
  - By Friday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2004 – Institutions receive feedback and decisions from HEFCE on Stage One applications
  - **Friday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004** – Deadline for Stage Two applications
  - By Friday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2004 – Final decisions made
  - From August 2004 – Projects start

Further information about how Phase Four was structured and the criteria that are *likely* to apply to Stage Five is available at:

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2001/01\\_60.htm](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2001/01_60.htm)

Information about Phase Five is available from the HEFCE website:

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk>

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<sup>3</sup> Correct at the time of going to press, but subject to revision by HEFCE – please check the relevant websites.

See also the National Co-ordination Team website for administrative details:

<http://www.ncteam.ac.uk>

To register an initial interest in FDTL5, please contact the PRS-LTSN:

- Clare Saunders (philosophy and HPS)  
clare@prs-ltsn.ac.uk
- Simon Smith (theology and religious studies)  
simon@prs-ltsn.ac.uk

or telephone: 0113 343 4184

## **LTSN ETHICS Project Events**

(Ethics Teaching Highlighted in Contextualised Scenarios)

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### ***Shared Learning in Higher Education and Beyond***

The ETHICS Project is offering a workshop at two alternative venues:

- **Birkbeck College, London, Malet Street (Main Building)**  
<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/ef/location/>  
Wednesday 12 November 10.45 am to 15:00 pm
- **University of York, King's Manor, Exhibition Square, York**  
<http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/presspr/kmanor/>  
Wednesday 26 November 2003: 10:45 am to 15:00 pm

These workshops will offer an opportunity to examine ethics teaching based on shared learning in both Higher Education and Continuing Professional Development. It will have the following objectives:

- **To elucidate the relationship between these two parallel teaching and learning environments in applied ethics.**
- **To map out areas/issues for future development.**

### **Shared-learning in ethics**

An interdisciplinary approach has long been a feature of research ethics, from policy-making level down to the composition of individual Research Ethics Committees but it is also becoming an important feature of everyday working practice as interprofessional collaboration takes on an increasingly central role in health and social care, business and manufacturing. This emphasis on interprofessional partnership means that graduates skilled at working across organizational boundaries will be in high demand.

Shared learning in Higher Education is seen as one way to prepare students to meet the challenges of working within teams drawing on a variety of skills, conceptual frameworks and professional values. Although interdisciplinary learning as a means towards greater

interprofessional collaboration is not, in itself, limited to ethical concerns, a number of studies have concluded that ethics is a good place to start when developing shared learning programmes.

## Aims

The workshop aims to examine current shared learning and teaching practice in Higher Education, and to compare it with programmes aimed at supporting interdisciplinary ethics training within professional environments.

## Format

The workshop will be structured around three themed sessions, each comprising two short presentations followed by facilitated discussion. If you are interested in offering a presentation or acting as a facilitator please email Susan Illingworth (ETHICS Project Coordinator: [susan@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:susan@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)) with a brief outline of your area of interest. Contributions would be particularly welcome if you have experience of any of the following:

- Shared learning in ethics in Higher Education (e.g. interdisciplinary teaching of healthcare ethics or research ethics).
- Interprofessional ethics seminars in Continuing Professional Development
- In-hospital Ethics Committees
- Research Ethics Committees

## Costs

The workshop is subsidised but there will be a small charge to cover costs. Lunch and refreshments are included.

## Registration of Interest

If you are interested in attending the workshop, please email the Project coordinator at [susan@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:susan@prs-ltsn.ac.uk). She will send you further details of the workshop as soon as they become available.

## PRS-LTSN Development of Faith Guides for use in Higher Education

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It seems that the religious beliefs of individuals are rarely taken into consideration in the design and content of courses in Higher Education (HE). Yet decisions made within HE can have a detrimental effect on people of faith. The PRS-LTSN Subject Centre is commissioning a series of guides that will seek to provide individuals, departments, and institutions with tips and resource information on issues relating to teaching people of faith in a HE environment. It is expected that as well as providing basic information these guides could also assist in issues such as recruitment, retention, accessibility, and employability.

There will be an initial series of guides respectively looking at issues involving students who follow Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, the New Age, and Sikhism. There will also be a single 'generic' guide that will address more general issues associated with teaching people of faith. The guides will initially be online resources and will then be produced in hard copy, either as a single volume or as a series of individual guides, each of which would contain the 'generic' guide.

The guides are to be written in a manner that will appeal to an academic who has little knowledge of the subject matter and requires concise but accurate advice. It is hoped that the first guides will appear in autumn 2003, and further guides will be considered depending of funding and feedback.

The guides will be careful to neither promote nor denigrate the beliefs that they discuss, and will need to be conscious of religious diversity, cultural sensitivity, the avoidance of stereotypical assumptions, the domination of specific worldview(s), and religious-cultural blurring.

It is expected that the guides will be relatively informal in style and, where possible, include case studies that will highlight issues and/or provide examples of successful practice. It is expected that they will include a general introduction to the faith, specifically in the UK context; the examination of key sensitivities; particular points of misunderstanding; issues of gender and sexuality; and will provide information on religious practice including ritual, festivals and dress-codes.

In addition to the narrative, each guide will contain a resources section that will include books, internet links, and addresses of organisations that can provide practical help and advice should the reader wish to investigate a matter further.

The Subject Centre has already consulted widely within the HE sector on what form the guides will take, and will expect authors to continue to consult with faith, cultural and community groups; chaplains and other campus representatives; and student groups.

As well as providing the means of support for people of faith and the people with whom they interact in HE, we hope that the guides will also help underline the importance of the study of religion in HE and are part of the PRS-LTSN Subject Centre's commitment to promote and raise the profile of the subjects that it supports.

At the time of writing we have not yet obtained authors for all the guides, so if you are interested in developing one (or know of a suitable person—perhaps one of your postgraduates) please contact me ([simon@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:simon@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)) for an author's guide. The PRS-LTSN is paying authors an honorarium for each guide.

Forthcoming Event:

## **“Religious Studies – What’s the Point?”**

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A Conference at **Lancaster University**, 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> December, 2003

Starting from a consideration of the impact of Ninian Smart on Religious Studies, this conference focuses on issues crucial to the field at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the premise that studying religion in comparative contexts is a worthwhile exercise that can widen horizons and deepen understandings of the world around us, discussion ranges into contemporary arguments over whether ‘religion’ is a viable topic of analysis and whether ‘Religious Studies’, as a field of study, should exist at all. Between these perspectives lies a host of questions about the ways we study, analyse and teach religion—from ‘universalist’ and ‘comparativist’, to ‘particularist’ positions. Other basic questions are linked to these broader areas of discussion: the language and the terms we use (or seek to avoid) in the research and teaching of Religious Studies; and especially, how we deal with terms and words that have particular(ist) orientations or value-laden meanings (e.g. ‘fundamentalism’, ‘cult’, ‘millenarian’) specific to certain cultural discourses but that come to be applied to other cultures and areas.

Among the speakers will be:

- Philip Barnes (University of Ulster)
- Evan Berry (University of California, Santa Barbara):
- Philip Goodchild (University of Nottingham):
- Richard D. Hecht (University of California, Santa Barbara):
- Gavin Hyman and Robert Segal in debate (Lancaster University)
- Roy Jackson (University of Durham):
- Tim Jensen (Southern University of Denmark)
- John Shepherd (University College of St. Martin's, Lancaster):
- David Smith (Lancaster University)
- Martin Stringer (University of Birmingham)

An evening session will debate thematic issues.

**To register an early interest email:** [martyn@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:martyn@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)



All the PRS-LTSN Subject Centre news on funding and events is available from our website:

**<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/index.html>**

*and* in our ***monthly e-bulletin newsletter***. To receive the e-bulletin you need to be registered with Subject Centre (visit the website).

The e-bulletin will keep you up-to-date with:

- Events
- Funding
- Conferences in learning and teaching
- National developments

NB: some institutions block mass emails. If you are registered but do not receive the e-bulletin, please contact David ([david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)) with an alternative email address.

## **Articles, Discussion and Practical Teaching**

Project Report:  
Diversifying Assessment 3  
**Web Projects in Undergraduate History of Science\***

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**Louise Jarvis and Joe Cain**

*Department of Science and Technology Studies  
University College London*

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## Introduction

This is the third paper in a series on diversifying assessment in undergraduate history of science programmes (Jarvis and Cain, 2002; 2003). This paper considers the use of assessable projects that either use or create Web-based resources.

Our project on promoting diversified assessment involves a survey of existing literature from the educational literature and a synthesis of practical advice on the design, implementation, and likely problems while introducing these concepts into an overall assessment strategy.

Use of the Web in course assessment is controversial in the history of science teaching community (Gooday, 2001) but, we think, for no good reason. Computer and information technology (C&IT) skills are key skills. Students use the Web extensively.<sup>1</sup> Parents and employers expect graduates to be adept users. Information access through libraries increasingly emphasises on-line outlets. Learning and Technology Minister Michael Willis explained in 2001 that people need C&IT skills “in almost every job. And a successful Britain needs them too.” (BBC, 2001a). Tutors have a firm responsibility to develop these skills in their degree programmes.

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\* Also published in Mossley, D. J. (ed.) (2003) *The Challenges of Using the World-Wide Web in Teaching History of Science* PRS-LTSN e-book.

<sup>1</sup> A late 2002 Egg survey found Internet use had increased to 42% of all adult Britons, 19 million people, with use by women up ten percent in the past six months (BBC, 2001b). Web and IT use is highest among those under 35 and in other adults among those in higher socio-economic group (BBC, 2001a). Certainly some have no interest in these skills. In national surveys of all adults, *Which?* Online reports nearly a third of those surveyed claim to have no plans to use the internet, claiming it is either too expensive to use of “has nothing relevant to their lives.” Yet 64% claim the internet “has become part of every life” (Ward, 2000).

Our consideration of Web projects distinguishes evaluation and construction, then divides construction into design and implementation. This compartmentalisation provides a deliberate progression in which students develop skills sequentially. Tutors don't need to accomplish all C&IT goals in one step and can easily combine Web projects with more familiar assignments.

## Definitions

On a basic level, Web sites consist of a series of linked documents. Each document (one Web page) combines text, graphics, and links to other documents located either within the site or located in other sites.

In Web site evaluation, students assess Web based resources as texts using critical reading and analytical skills. They also consider strengths and weaknesses of resources based both on principles of Web site design and on features distinct to the medium.

Constructing Web sites involves two phases: design and implementation. By the end, students can expect to have created texts and graphics, located relevant additional materials, then combined these into Web pages. They link multiple pages together into a functioning Web site. In Web design, students plan site components and consider overall site architecture. Implementation involves assembly and programming.

Web site construction can be used as the final stage of a research project that might otherwise produce a research paper. Web sites can be produced by groups or by individuals, with varying degrees of credit attached to design versus content. Web sites can be submitted on diskette or published through a course Internet site.

## Benefits

C&IT skills are ever more important key skills (UCL, 1999–2000) and increasingly tied to “graduateness” (HEQC QEG, 1995). Degree programmes normally respond by encouraging rudimentary literacy and familiarity: use of electronic libraries (especially databases and on-line replacements of printed materials) in research, word processing for writing, and e-mail for communication. This basic training is admirable, but students are entering higher education with increasingly sophisticated average C&IT skills (c.f. BBC, 2001a; Kent School District, 2001). Support staff within universities normally offer basic and supplemental skills training, such as preparation for the European Computer Driving

Licence.<sup>2</sup> Tutors in degree programmes should press on: combining subject-specific skill development with further C&IT training.

In many departments, student use of Web based resources for research is a controversial subject (Gooday, 2001). Those rejecting the use of on-line resources argue an increasingly untenable position. A June 2002 OCLC survey reports nearly 80% of students use Web resources for most or every assignment (OCLC, 2002). Also, publishers and libraries are shifting to on-line circulation, and high quality on-line resources are far more common than several years ago. The situation on-line now mirrors the long-standing situation in print: quality varies across a wide spectrum.

Students need skills for separating the wheat from the chaff. They need to develop skills for identifying reliable versus erroneous sources and they need to develop technical skills for identifying methodological and historiographical frameworks. Creating projects that develop critical reading and evaluation skills will train students to be intelligent consumers of information regardless of the source. Whether these projects begin with Web based or print materials makes little difference. Indeed, advocates of extensive Web use argue additional attention to special aspects of the Web as a medium for communication will improve the student's ability to judge the effect of Web publication and monitor its effects on other kinds of communication. Tutors need to step up to the front and lead.

Focusing on Web site construction provides opportunities for students to learn basic principles of Web design and basic technologies for implementation. Students with basic skills already can be pressed further. Training students to become producers of Web based resources emphasises project design and management skills as well as collaboration. It also develops some second generation C&IT key skills.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Details of the European Computer Driving Licence and sample curriculum are provided by UCL IS (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Kent School District (2001) provides a model for placing C&IT skills within a framework of progression despite the fact their plan is developed for primary and secondary schools. Intel Corporation's (2002) "Teach to the Future" program provides teacher training for curriculum design in which C&IT skills are integrated into course units. (The curriculum outline is posted by ICT, 2002.) Stephenson (2001) considers the value of increased C&IT training within the broader framework of innovations in higher education. Ward Schofield (1995:62-93) justifies learning with (rather than about) computers in humanities programmes as a way to support constructivist learning objectives. Her approach is bolstered by Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000:206-230), and Brown, Race and Bull (1999). Balestri, Ehrmann and Ferguson (1992)

Possessing these skills can prove decisive in competitive employment environments. Guzdial, et al. (1992) stress the importance of design as a key skill. Harel and Papert (1992) argue design and implementation skills in C&IT generally promote “meta-cognitive awareness” (students thinking about their own thinking processes), cognitive control (planning and self-management of the learning process), and “meta-conceptual thinking” (students thinking about the extent of their own knowledge).

Sequencing learning outcomes from evaluation to design to implementation serves student progression. For one, it allows students to apply and extend their existing skills as they press forward. More importantly, it decomposes the overall project into many skill elements. This compartmentalisation prevents students feeling overwhelmed and provides opportunities for them to master particular aspects of a large project before moving on. In this particular sequence, experience with evaluation builds intuitions for design, and fresh design skills guide implementation. Compartmentalisation also helps tutors develop projects over several assignments or over several courses. Dropping students into implementation is poor practice and leads to low value in the result.

Sequencing also serves students who begin Web projects with skills already beyond novice levels. In a sense, compartmentalisation restrains the overeager student and forces them to concentrate on mastery of single skills. This provides opportunities for skill refinement as well as for filling in knowledge gaps. Compartmentalisation also allows for more systematic coverage of fundamentals and prevents students from using expert skills in some areas to compensate for relative weaknesses elsewhere. Compartmentalisation is more likely to contribute to peer and self guided learning, better collaboration in group work, and improved validity in assessment of group work.

Web based projects lend themselves to group work (Thorley and Gregory, 1994; Hunter, et al., 1996; Jaques, 2000). They also can be supplemented by posters or oral presentations addressing the content and design of their site (Jarvis and Cain, 2003). Publishing student work on-line contributes to an increased sense of responsibility during the project. Afterwards, it increases the sense of ownership.

Web evaluation and construction projects should improve student appraisals of fairness (Gipps, 1994). Not only does the assessment credit creative skills and encourages self-expression, but

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consider ways for even simple programming to provide highly motivating learner-centred working environments.

students perceive the activity to be more enjoyable than other kinds of tasks (despite the fact few new tasks need to be introduced). A student who cannot trouble themselves to locate a reading in the library might spend hours thinking about material located through the Internet or tracing sources for a Web page that will be made widely available.

## Recommendations and Implementation

A well known example of student Web projects in history of science is Van Helden (1995–2001). Though useful for interesting colleagues in the potential of Web projects in course work, this site tends to present student projects as little more than written essays converted into HTML code. Barrett, Levinson, and Lisanti (2001) provide syllabus advice for courses using Web projects, but they lean towards rather complex Web programming and work within a context in which Web design is the primary learning outcome of the course. Numerous course Web sites display student projects at various levels of expertise. Barnard History (1997–2000) usefully shows an evolving level of sophistication of design and implementation skills. Other examples include Winstanley (2001), Harvey (1998), Ayers and Thomas (n.d.). Other examples can be located by Web searching using key words “student Web presentation” and “student Web projects history”. Students can be intimidated by the high standard of professionally produced Web resources. Shifting to novice sites their peer assessment of models offers a far better standard for comparison. For this, Van Helden (1995–2001) is ideal.

Projects involving Web site use can be separated into three modules: evaluation, design, and implementation. These can be treated in sequence within a single course or over a series of courses within the degree. Tutors should be certain to locate their assumptions about student skill levels within a framework for progression (e.g., Kent School District, 2001) and to clearly distinguish the needs for novice and expert learners (Bransford, et al., 2000:31–50).

On evaluation, students should consider what makes for good Web pages and sites. In some respects, Web content can be understood simply as a text to be read. Thus, evaluation makes use of critical reading skills as described generally by Fairbairn and Fairbairn (2001) and specifically by Pirie (1985). (Jarvis and Cain, 2002 discuss use of essays to develop critical reading skills.) Web evaluation projects focusing on content, perspective, methodology, and historiography can substitute for tasks focusing on the evaluation of printed sources. Hollingsworth (1999), for instance, allowed students to complete a critical review either

of a printed text or a Web site, using evaluation criteria he provided, as part of assessment in an introductory course. Tutors can select from a wide range of sites when setting projects aimed at content evaluation, especially those relevant to course topics.

Writing styles for Web sites tends to vary from various print formats.<sup>4</sup> Many scholars argue technologies such as interactivity, multimedia and non-linearity transform Web texts into different forms of communication (Barrett, 1988; Barrett, 1992; Barrett and Redmond, 1997). This suggests that skills in Web evaluation involve more skills than reading printed text. Murray (1997) provides helpful advice for introducing evaluation of non-linear narrative. Greenberg (1998) introduces the relation between reading on-screen and underlying cognitive processes. Nielsen (1995–2002) provides useful tips for reading Web sites as more complex texts. Tutors can develop these additional evaluation skills in stages: first using Web sites much like printed texts that use special features minimally, then considering more complex sites that display more significant differences from print.

Complete evaluation rubrics for Web sites tend to focus on five categories: ideas and content, organisation and design, value for audience, presentation, and technical features (such as navigation and use of conventions). Many rubrics for evaluating Web sites are accessible on-line.<sup>5</sup> Tutors can ask student peer groups to elaborate these categories using Web based research and a study of familiar Web sites. Alexander and Tate (1999b) and Harris (1999) provide superb guides for tutors developing evaluation criteria for many learning outcomes.

On evaluating design, Williams and Tollett (1998), Krug (2000) and Lopuck (2001) provide solid overviews of evaluation for beginners. Of the many on-line tutorials for Web evaluation, Lycos.com's (2002) WebMonkey programme is designed for beginners. Cato (2001) and Dalglish (2000) present more advanced considerations focusing especially on "user-centered" features. Basic principles of graphic design in print are presented by Williams (1994) and these form some of the

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<sup>4</sup> Henning (2000) introduces key differences; Bonime and Pohlmann (1998) treat the subject in detail. McGovern, Norton, and O'Dowd (2001) and Kapoun (2000) provide a style guide for writing on-line that considers wider differences. Alexander and Tate (1999a; 1999b) provide some evaluation criteria for on-line writing. Reflecting on the differences between print and Web texts can parallel discussion of other differences resulting from format changes, such as that between print and broadcast journalism.

<sup>5</sup> Kapoun (2000) and Bakken and Armstrong (2000) provide well-constructed examples. WebQuest (2001) can be recommended for its sequenced presentation. For others, search using key words: "Web page evaluation criteria" and "Web evaluation rubric".



fundamental principles used in the design of Web texts. Sumner (2000) offers an on-line tutorial for use and evaluation custom made for history and philosophy of science.

As consumers of Web based resources become increasingly sophisticated, concerns over “usability” move to the foreground in evaluation rubrics.<sup>6</sup> McClure (1999) and Alexander and Tate (1999a; 1999b) provide extensive critical bibliographies for evaluation of complex sites and sites designed for specific purposes. Design also refers to special issues which make the consumption of information on-screen different from that on a printed page (Nielsen, 1995–2002; Greenberg, 1998; Nielsen, 2000). Students can over-emphasise the graphic arts element of Web design to the detriment of sound navigation and clear presentation.

Designing a Web site involves decisions about how to transform the resources a student creates or collects into Web pages and what kinds of architecture works best for the flow of information within the site.<sup>7</sup> Retrospective accounts of site construction emphasise the fundamental importance of design processes prior to implementation (e.g., Berger, 1998; Cain, 1999).

Design includes attention to information architecture. On one hand this involves the conceptual arrangement of information and resources which users move through to locate the information they want. On the other hand it involves the physical arrangement of information and pages within a Web site. Barrett, Levinson and Lisanti (2001) introduce the topic. Andres (1999), Rosenfeld and Morville (1998), and Phillips and DiGiorgio (1997) provide useful discussions.

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<sup>6</sup> Guides to usability range from simple (Nielsen, 1995–2002; Williams and Tollett, 1998) to complex (Nielsen, 2000; Brinck, et al., 2002) and focus on an increasing body of empirical studies concerning human-computer interactions. Students with deep interests in human-computer interactions can access this extensive discipline through (Dix, 1997). Advanced issues in design include attention to accessibility issues such as when Web resources are experienced in voice through programmes for the visually impaired. Accessibility issues are widely discussed on-line, search keywords “Web design accessibility”.

<sup>7</sup> Guidance for tutors seeking to introduce assessment based on student production of Web resources is sparse. Barrett, Levinson and Lisanti (2001) is a rare exception though it focuses on courses dedicated solely to Web design, and it assumes advanced C&IT skills among the students. Relevant literature tends to focus directly on implementing particular design features or particular programming needs. This seems inadequate: akin to dropping a novice swimmer in the deep end of a pool and expecting not only to survive but also to build optimal skills.

Planning and design can be made operational in the story board and flow chart model described by Jolliffe, Ritter and Stevens (2001). DiNucci, Giudice and Stiles (1998:38–67) implement this approach in an easy-to-follow presentation. Planning can vary in its depth.<sup>8</sup> It can involve students in issues such as a site's purpose, audience, and limitations as well as considerations such as mechanisms for evaluating a site's use and success in accomplishing its goals. These are standard concerns for commercial Web producers (Andres, 1999; Dalglish, 2000; Nielsen, 2000). Some coverage of this stage is strongly recommended. Importantly, it requires no technical knowledge of computer programming or specialised software. It can serve as an assessable outcome in itself. Design elements (such as story boards, flow charts, and strategic plans) provide useful replacements in cases where students experience substantial difficulties with implementation or other circumstances prevent on-line work. Phillips (1997) integrates design and evaluation themes.

Tutors can focus student effort by using a design brief to describe expectations for the project. For projects introducing Web design to novices, a detailed brief can provide much needed guidance. It also provides a mechanism for tutors to embed principles of good presentation, navigation, and usability. Briefs for more advanced projects can focus on specific areas for skill development. A design brief replaces an open-ended assignment with an explicit standard. Students then know when their project satisfies expectations for the purposes of assessment and can make decisions on how much more effort they wish to add. Design briefs also can emphasise some skills to the exclusion of others. For example, focusing assessment on writing skills, factual accuracy, overall site integration, and navigation means the tutor sets some design features (such as elaborate graphics or complex programming) outside the learning objectives for the project. Design briefs help students maintain their focus. Implementation involves converting resources and designs into actual Web pages. This requires access to computer hardware and software. Basic Web implementation requires no knowledge of programming codes (such as HTML, XML, CSS, and so on). Common Web authoring tools resemble word processing programmes. Peer assistance provides an important source for skill development. University computer networks normally supply students

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<sup>8</sup> Cain (2001) provides an example of strategic planning—in this case for a departmental Web site. Barrett, Levinson and Lisanti (2001) provide examples of planning at different levels.

access to particular Web authoring tools, such as DreamWeaver or FrontPage. Students may need basic training in these software tools as well as basic training using network environments. Tutors should ensure students have access to beginner manuals and relevant support materials. Hands-on tutorials improve active learning.

## Potential Problems

Web evaluation and construction projects require skill development on the part of course tutors. This is particularly true for implementation. The long-term benefits of this training are substantial; however, this will take time and resources to launch. Practical advice for integrating C&IT skills into course work and degree programmes is provided by Jolliffe, Ritter and Stevens (2001), Maier and Warren (2000), and Leask and Pachler (1999). Haydn, Arthur and Hunt (2001:173–205) present a strategic overview of C&IT competence in the classroom and a self-assessment tool for tutors regarding various C&IT skills. Kent School District (2001) provides a useful model of progression for C&IT skills.

Web implementation projects should be structured to slowly accumulate skills and material. Students might research and write text first. Next, create a single Web page. Next, consider design and create story boards and flow charts, and so on. If assigned as group work, care should be taken to ensure students cannot divide the work in ways that exclude one another from any one aspect of the process.

Tutors may need to provide advice for working within the local computing environment. Krumme (n.d.) demonstrates the kind of advice that can be useful.

Computer anxiety might inhibit some student efforts on these projects. Brown, Race and Bull (1999) report this anxiety is far more prevalent than most tutors assume and offer some suggestions for reducing these levels overall. For C&IT skills, tutors should identify the precise source of this anxiety (i.e., inexperience with computers generally, inexperience with particular software, lack of knowledge about local procedures, and so on) and direct support accordingly. Students with remedial skills can find assistance through on-line tutorials, self-help books, and training courses offered by University support staff. Assistance of peers also can be an effective means for skill development. Ward Schofield (1995) identifies many of the common barriers to student use of computers.

Another issue of fairness involves gender differences in students' responses to computer-based tasks. Brown, Race and Bull (1999) report

females are consistently more computer anxious than men. While it seems that this kind of anxiety is perhaps more enduring than expected, it can almost certainly be controlled and rendered reasonable by the appropriate use of training and briefing sessions. This may lead to the added benefit that students can overcome a long term concern about using computers which will render their transition to an almost universally computer-based vocational environment less problematic.

## Discussion

Like every other technical activity, use and production of Web resources are activities that can be enhanced through training. The use of on-line resources is now a permanent feature of the higher education landscape. Tutors who ignore or restrict Web use do so at their own peril. Tutors who promote critical use will avoid growing problems over haphazard use of Web resources. OCLC (2002) reports a growing sense of need among students for these critical skills. Tutors can incorporate Web evaluation into early courses as a way to promote critical reflection about the information they consume from Web sites. A progressive programme of increasing and increasingly sophisticated use not only can improve C&IT skills but also can foster an environment rich with active learning.

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Article:

# Teaching Philosophy to Non-Philosophy Students: The Example of Architecture and Town Planning

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**Nigel Taylor**

*School of Planning and Architecture  
University of the West of England*

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## 1. Introduction

Philosophy is not just taught in philosophy departments, or to students specializing in philosophy. Courses in philosophy are also taught to students of other disciplines, in non-philosophy departments. For example, philosophy often forms part of the curriculum of students of medicine (“medical ethics”), law (“jurisprudence”), the humanities and social sciences (e.g. the philosophy of social science; political philosophy), even architecture and town planning. Are there, then, any general principles which we can identify to guide teachers teaching philosophy to non-philosophy students? Is there anything we can say about what might constitute good (or perhaps helpful) practice in this area? These are the questions which I address in this paper.

In addressing these questions I shall not be drawing on any substantial body of literature about this topic, still less on an established body of “theory”, for there isn’t any. Instead, I shall advance some views and arguments based on my own experience, and my reflections on that experience, of teaching philosophy to non-philosophy students. In particular, though I am a “qualified philosopher”, I have for many years taught courses in philosophy to undergraduate and postgraduate students of town planning and architecture, within a school of planning and architecture. I shall therefore use these disciplines to illustrate what I have to say, although what I advocate about teaching philosophy to students of these disciplines is also, I shall claim, generalisable to other disciplines as well (because of this I shall occasionally illustrate my points with respect to other disciplines).

This paper is organised into two parts. First (in section 2) I describe how I think the relevant subject matter of philosophy is best taught to students of town planning and architecture (and by extension,

to other non-philosophy students as well). Second (in section 3), I describe what useful intellectual skills non-philosophy students can gain through studying some philosophy.

Before I come to either of these matters, I should say at the outset that I regard the teaching of philosophy, be it to non-philosophy students or to specialist students of philosophy, as very important. There are some people who seem to think that learning about or “doing” philosophy is of little practical value, however interesting it may otherwise be. I disagree with this view. On the contrary, I regard an education in philosophy as being of great intellectual and practical value, and most of all because of the analytical skills of clear thinking and reasoning which are (or ought to be) developed through the study of philosophy. Specialist philosophy teachers, immersed day-in-day-out in the teaching of these analytical skills, may be apt to lose sight of this. But if one teaches in a context where these basic thinking skills are not repeatedly emphasised in the various courses that students follow—that is, non-philosophy degree programmes—then one can see all the more clearly how valuable—indeed, essential—these skills are. I shall say more about this in section 3 of this paper.

## 2. The teaching of philosophy in other disciplines: subject matter

Quite what aspect of philosophy is taught to non-philosophy students will depend, of course, on the requirements of the “home” or “parent” discipline which the students are studying. On medical courses, for example, it is typically some aspect of ethics; on social science courses some aspect of epistemology or the philosophy of science; and so on. However, whatever the relevant substantive material that is being drawn in from philosophy, I shall here describe two possible approaches to teaching this material, and suggest that the second approach I shall describe is to be preferred to the first.

The first approach (I shall term it Approach 1) is as follows. It is an approach where a teacher teaches his or her students first about the relevant aspect of philosophy just as it might be taught in an introductory course to philosophy students (e.g. ethics, epistemology, the philosophy of science, etc), and then makes some suggestions about how this “bit” of philosophy may be applied to the students’ own discipline. An example would be where a teacher teaching some medical students about medical ethics first teaches these students about moral philosophy (I shall here use this term interchangeably with “ethics”), and then tries to show how different moral positions might be applied in (say)

decision-making about the allocation of resources for different kinds of treatments in the health service. Alternatively, a teacher might teach the same medical students about a specific moral position, such as utilitarianism, and then show what kind of decisions and judgements about difficult medical cases might follow from a utilitarian point of view. In the same way, utilitarian ethics might be taught to some students of town planning, who are then shown how this might be applied to (say) evaluating alternative sites for some new development project (such as a new road, a new airport terminal, etc). Certainly, through the use of cost-benefit analysis, utilitarianism has been much used, implicitly if not explicitly, in British urban planning practice (see e.g. Allison 1975, Lichfield 1996).

Now, I don't say that there is not something to be gained from the approach just described. It is just that I think there is an alternative approach which is better, and potentially less alienating for the students. The problem with Approach 1 is that, whilst it may have great appeal for those students who have, or are predisposed to develop, an interest in philosophy, for students who are not so inclined, and whose prime interest is (naturally enough) their own discipline, "philosophy" can come across as something external to, and thus (for some students) alien to their own discipline. In spite of one's efforts to demonstrate its relevance by showing how philosophy can be (or even is already, implicitly) applied to the relevant discipline, philosophy can come to be seen as something separate from the main discipline when it is taught as something which first has to be mastered before its lessons are extracted and "applied" (in a "top-down" manner) to the students' own discipline. Taught in this way, there is the danger that many students do not internalise philosophical thinking or analysis as an integral part of their own discipline or as something which arises naturally within it. And if philosophy is seen in this way as a separate—and separable—activity, many students can come to regard it as something that can be set aside, or "dropped", once they have passed the necessary (and irksome) exams in the subject. As some students may say about it all: "I'm not very good at philosophy" (some say the same about "theory"), as if "philosophy" is indeed something separate from what their own discipline is "really about", and hence something which they don't really need to be competent in their own discipline.

Some qualifications apply to what has just been said. With students who are already pre-disposed to become interested in philosophy (or indeed, for students who are pre-disposed to become

interested in whatever they study), the above approach can prove exciting and relevant. And of course, the teacher matters. With a teacher who is excited by philosophical questions, and who conveys this enthusiasm to his or her students whilst bringing out the relevance of philosophy to the students' discipline, Approach 1 can succeed. However, even with these qualifications in place, I think the approach I shall now describe (call it Approach 2) is preferable because more likely to be effective in internalising the lessons of philosophy.

Approach 2 seeks to teach philosophy to students of another discipline in a way that makes philosophy—or philosophical questions—*internal* to that discipline, and this because, in almost any reasonably complex discipline or practice, there are philosophical questions which arise which are internal to that discipline or practice (if there are disciplines or practices where such questions don't arise, then indeed it is not worth teaching philosophy to students of those disciplines). In fact, because the relevant philosophical questions are here internal to whatever discipline is in question, one can approach the teaching of philosophy to students of that discipline indirectly, even surreptitiously, by stealth. Indeed, with this approach it is possible to teach students philosophy without even saying it is “philosophy”, at least until later (when one might say: “by the way, the sorts of questions we have been examining are what we could call ‘philosophical’ questions”). In this way—apart from anything else—the students won't be initially put off by the word “philosophy”.<sup>1</sup> But how can this be done?

To answer this, I have first to say something about how I regard philosophy, for the adoption of Approach 2 presupposes a particular view of philosophy.

In my view, the discipline of philosophy is distinguished by two things: first, a certain kind of subject-matter, substantive material, or “content” (or, one might say: certain kinds of substantive questions), and second, by a characteristic method of addressing this content or these questions. As regards the first of these, I take it that philosophy is the examination of ideas and arguments about the most *fundamental* questions we can ask (e.g. about what we know and how we know it; about how we should live our lives; about the ideal society, and the ideal political system for a society; etc). It has been said that the questions philosophy deals with are very “general”, or more “abstract” questions. Thus Quine once said that: “Philosophy is abstract through being very general. A

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is unavoidable if a course has the word “philosophy” as part of its title. Also, there are of course students who are *attracted* by the term.

physicist will tell us about causal connections between events of certain sorts; a biologist will tell us about causal connections between events of other sorts; but the philosopher asks about causal connection in general—what is it for one event to cause another?” (Quine 1978, in Magee 1978, p 143). This is true, but it does not really explain *why* philosophy is, as Quine puts it, “abstract through being very general”. In my view, it is the fundamental nature of the questions which philosophy asks which generates the generality and abstractness of philosophical enquiry. Thus in the example given by Quine, to speak of causes in physics or biology presupposes a more fundamental question which can be asked (and which, if one is being thorough, one should ask before one proceeds to speak of any particular causes in e.g. physics and biology), which is: “what *is* a cause?” and (relatedly) “how can we identify a cause?” These latter questions are clearly more fundamental than to ask about this or that particular causal connection (e.g. in physics or biology). And as this example shows, the more fundamental questions are necessarily more general (and hence also more abstract) than the questions a physicist or a biologist examines when they ascribe causal connections to physical or biological phenomena on the presumption that there are such causes in the first place.

Now, if we see philosophy in this way, we can also see how philosophy can be approached internally, as it were, within some other discipline, such as town planning. For in any discipline, fundamental questions can be asked of it or about it. In relation to town planning for example, such questions include the following (I add some supplementary questions in brackets): What is town planning? (Is it one thing or many? Is “planning” a species of “rational decision-making and action”?—and if so, what is “rational” decision-making and action?). What should town planning aim to do? (And if we say, in answer to this, such things as “serve the public interest” or “encourage sustainable development”, then this prompts the further questions: “what is the public interest?”, “what is sustainable development?”). Does the institutionalised activity of town and country planning by the state result in better development outcomes than an unregulated free market system of land development? (And what is it, in any case, for a market to be unregulated? Is there any such thing? Are there alternative forms of capitalist land development? And—for that matter—are there alternative forms of state intervention to plan land development?) Should the state—through the apparatus of the planning system—control the aesthetic form of new buildings? (What, in any case, is the “aesthetic”

element of building and environmental experience? Are people's evaluations of the aesthetic quality of new development entirely subjective, and if so, does this undermine the grounds for planning control over aesthetic matters?). And so on.

These are some of the questions I invite students to examine in courses I teach in the theory and philosophy of urban and environmental planning. They are (in my submission) philosophical questions. Yet they are internal to planning. That they are so is shown by the fact that my own town planning students raise these questions themselves. So these questions are not first derived from philosophy, such that they have first to be explained and understood in that context before being related or applied to town planning. In fact, I can invite students to examine these questions without mentioning the word "philosophy", or saying that they are addressing "philosophical questions". Yet in examining these questions, my students (though they be students of town planning and not philosophy) are "doing" philosophy. But the philosophy they are doing is the philosophy of their own discipline, because these questions derive from (a deep questioning of) their own discipline. As I said, any reasonably complex discipline or practice has "its own" philosophical questions.

To be sure, in approaching the study of philosophy in this way one can, and often does, "get to" exactly the same kinds of questions philosophers ask when doing philosophy. For example, in considering what environmental planning should aim at, many planning students volunteer an answer like: "do whatever brings about the greatest possible benefit (or happiness or well-being, etc) to the people in a given area", and from this one is naturally drawn into an examination of utilitarian moral theory. Similarly, in considering whether town planning results in better outcomes than the market, one is drawn into examining (and comparing) liberal, socialist and conservative political theory. Or, if one asks what might be a "fair" or "just" city or city plan (or what might be a just distribution of environmental goods, such as green parks), one is inevitably drawn into examining alternative theories of justice. But note again: in all these cases, we arrive at the examination of these areas of philosophy from questions about town planning. We don't presume (as we do in Approach 1) that philosophy is relevant to planning and then examine it first and come to town planning later. Rather, we pose some fundamental questions about planning itself and then find that we are, inevitably, drawn into philosophy, and this because the questions themselves—being fundamental—are philosophical questions.

### 3. The teaching of philosophy in other disciplines: intellectual skills

I said earlier that I thought that there were two things which distinguished philosophy as a discipline: its subject matter—or the sorts of questions it examined (*viz.*: fundamental questions)—and its characteristic method of addressing this subject matter or these questions. I turn now to its method of analysis. And here I take it as read that what is sometimes called philosophical analysis involves the most thorough-going examination of ideas and arguments that human reason can bring to bear. In this respect, the “fundamentality” of the subject-matter of philosophy (*i.e.* of the questions which philosophy examines) is mirrored by the “fundamentality” of its method of analysis. There are two major parts to philosophical analysis which I wish to highlight here. First, philosophers are rightly concerned with subjecting to analysis, and from this clarifying, the meaning of ideas and arguments, and this for the plain logical reason that one cannot examine an idea or argument unless one is first clear what that idea or argument is. It is in this context, of course, that philosophers become interested in the analysis of concepts (or at least complex and contested concepts), for these are the basic building blocks of arguments. Second, having clarified the relevant concepts and arguments, philosophy involves the rigorous examination of the claims being made in a given argument (or—if the work of clarification suggests that there are several different versions of some concept or claim—then the examination of these different versions in turn). In particular, we are especially interested in identifying what reasons are or might be adduced to support some position, and then subjecting these reasons to critical examination (and here, of course, philosophy draws on relevant evidence and understanding from other disciplines, and especially relevant sciences).<sup>2</sup>

All this, I presume, is unexceptional and largely uncontroversial amongst philosophers. What does seem to me to be surprising is that what has just been said is not standard fare in other disciplines too. For really all I have described are the main constituents of clear thinking and reasoning, and—one would have thought—such clear thinking and

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<sup>2</sup> The brief account of philosophical method given here might suggest that I see philosophy simply as an analytical, and not a creative discipline. No such implication is intended. I take it that it is a legitimate part of philosophy to create new ideas and systems of thought (or “philosophies”), as well as just to analyse them. In Strawson’s (1959) terms, I see it as part of philosophy to engage in “revisionary” as well as “descriptive” metaphysics. It is just that my concern in this section is with its analytical aspect.

reasoning should be central to good practice in any discipline. In other words, what I have described as the method of analysis characteristic of philosophy does not seem to me something which is or should be seen as peculiar or unique to philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In fact, that this has come to be acknowledged can be seen in the emergence over the last twenty years of that generic literature on “critical thinking”, “critical reasoning”, “argument analysis”, etc. and its application in disciplines other than philosophy. As John Shand says in opening his book *Arguing Well*, he is concerned with presenting “the basic tools and principles of good reasoning in arguments” (Shand 2000 ch 1 p 3), and this because arguing well matters, in general, not just in philosophy. This concern with “critical reasoning” has also been reinforced more recently by the attention being given to the development of generic and/or transferable skills in education. And that these skills of reasoning and argument are “generic” skills is evidenced, again, by the fact that one can speak of and teach these skills without mentioning “philosophy”.<sup>4</sup>

To return to my main example in this paper: town planners certainly ought to be clear and critical thinkers. For much town planning work is about deliberation and judgement, negotiation and argument, talking and communication (as some planning theorists have come to emphasise over the last twenty years in the literature on “communicative planning theory”; see e.g. Fischer and Forester 1993). Being able to clarify complex situations, ideas and arguments, and critically to assess arguments for or against proposals, is thus central to good planning work. Because of this, in teaching “philosophy” to architects and planners it is especially valuable to draw special attention to, and further develop students’ capacities to think and reason clearly and critically. In other words, it is valuable to teach non-philosophy students what is now fashionably called “critical thinking”, “critical reasoning”, “argument analysis”, etc. Or (to put this another way), it is especially valuable to teach students of architecture and planning (as well as non-philosophy students generally) what I have described here as the characteristic

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<sup>3</sup> Which isn’t to say that the kind of “philosophical analysis” described here is necessarily central to *all* disciplines. In some (e.g. surgery) the development of relevant scientific understanding and/or practical skill or craft may be more important.

<sup>4</sup> I don’t want to seem to be denigrating or apologising for philosophy, or denying that philosophers have made something of a specialism of developing and employing critical thinking. That may be the case, but however that may be, my point is simply that the skills of clear and critical thinking and reasoning *are* generic skills, and so of relevance and value to intellectual work generally, not just in “philosophy”, and further, that the term “philosophy” doesn’t *have* to be mentioned in teaching these skills.



method of philosophy, as distinct from its substantive content. Indeed, I suggest that this is the most valuable, and the most practical, aspect of “philosophy” which non-philosophy students can learn.

I have put this very generally, and in conclusion I shall highlight two areas of analytical thinking, which we associate with philosophy, which are especially valuable in the education of non-philosophy students. Here again I shall illustrate these two areas of analytical thinking in relation to the teaching of philosophy to town planning students. The two areas of thinking concern, respectively, the analysis of complex concepts, and the analysis of arguments.

Under the British system of planning, local planning authorities are required to prepare development plans for their respective areas, and to control development proposals (i.e. applications for planning permission to develop land) by reference to the approved development plan. In both preparing development plans for their areas, and in making decisions about development proposals, local planning authorities typically seek to achieve and reconcile a number of objectives. They will aim, for example, to ensure that new development contributes to the *economic development or regeneration* of a locality; that new development is *aesthetically pleasing* (either in itself, or within its particular location or context); that new development is not socially divisive, even that it promotes *social cohesion* (as it is now called) or *social justice* (as it used to be called); to ensure that new development is “*sustainable*” (or more specifically, *environmentally or ecologically sustainable*); that, overall, the way a particular area is developed is in the *public interest* (be it the public at large, or the public circumscribed by a particular locality, such as the public of a particular city); etc. Further, in reaching decisions about development local planning authorities seek to ensure that the process of decision-making is as transparent and inclusive—that is, as genuinely *democratic*—as possible (town planning was one of the first areas of public life in the United Kingdom in which it became a statutory obligation for there to be “*public participation*” in the preparation of development plans). In the foregoing, all the italicised terms constitute some of the central normative concepts in the theory and practice of town planning. And yet, although what these concepts seek to describe is central to planning practice (they specify what town planning is aiming to *do*), they are often—indeed generally—used in vague and ambiguous ways. So, on the logical grounds that we cannot aim at something unless we are first reasonably clear what it is we are aiming at, a fundamental discipline

which students of planning need to acquire is that of analysing—with a view to clarifying—the meaning of these basic planning concepts.

Once students are drawn into this work of “conceptual analysis” it soon becomes apparent that, with nearly all these complex concepts, there are differing and often rival conceptions of them. There are, for example, different conceptions of what counts as the “aesthetic” component of environmental experience and form, and equally of what counts as “sustainable development”, the “public interest”, “democracy”, even “economic development”. Through examining these concepts more closely and critically, town planning students can therefore come to see more clearly that there is, or can be, debate about the appropriate interpretation of these concepts, and further, that the way these debates are resolved can have a direct effect on the practice of town planning. An example of this, well known in political philosophy, concerns the concept of the public interest. Thus the adoption of a Rousseauesque “common interest” conception of the public interest can result in different planning proposals compared with a “maximising” utilitarian (or “cost-benefit”) view of the public interest. These conceptual disputes—and the conceptual work which underpins them—are therefore not merely academic; they can have a practical bearing on what town planning decisions are actually made, on how town planning is actually (or should be) *done*.

Speaking of debate brings me to the second area of analytical thinking which is especially valuable for students of town planning and architecture: the analysis of arguments, and in particular, the analysis of the logical form of arguments—of the claims being made, of the reasons given for those claims, and of the logical relationship (if any) between reasons and claims (and especially whether certain claims necessarily follow from the reasons given).

Actually, it is surprising how little argument—and especially how little careful and systematic argument—there is in much of the academic literature in town planning or, indeed, in some of the related literature in the social sciences, geography, and the humanities to which student planners are frequently referred. Where arguments are put, they are often advanced in a scrambled form, both conceptually and logically. So, on the grounds that one cannot evaluate an argument until one is first clear what the argument is, one of the most valuable exercises students can practice is to take a piece of text and simply clarify what claims the text is making and what reasons are given to support these claims, and to do this by, as it were, recasting the arguments in something like syllogistic

form. In my own experience, this simple exercise comes as a revelation to most non-philosophy students, including postgraduate students. Indeed, in my experience, it is often *postgraduate* students who find such lessons in elementary logic the greatest revelation (this has led me to wonder about the widespread assumption that, through studying for a degree—*any* degree—students learn to *think*).

I have not space here to relate all the other aspects of argument analysis that one can usefully teach to non-specialist philosophy students. But, to sum up, the main lesson to learn (and be taught) is the unexceptional one of valid argument, and the main way to learn it is through *practice*. As John Shand (2000) has written, the key thing in “arguing well” is to learn to reason well, and this in turn requires the acquisition of an attentiveness to the truth of the premises of arguments and the validity of the inferences made from given premises—in short, an attentiveness to the deductive soundness of arguments. None of this should come as a surprise to philosophers (at least philosophers in the analytical tradition), whose daily work customarily involves the practice of these analytical thinking skills. Yet outside specialist schools of philosophy, in the teaching of non philosophy students, these basic lessons of clear and critical thinking and reasoning cannot be emphasised, or practised, enough. In fact, if students generally were to receive such formal tuition in thinking and reasoning, they might come to agree with John Stuart Mill, who wrote in his autobiography:

My own consciousness and experience ultimately led me to appreciate . . . the value of an early practical familiarity with school logic. I know of nothing, in my education, to which I think myself more indebted for whatever capacity of thinking I have attained. The first intellectual operation in which I arrived at any proficiency, was dissecting a bad argument, and finding in what part the fallacy lay. . . . I am persuaded that nothing, in modern education, tends so much, when properly used, to form exact thinkers, who attach a precise meaning to words and propositions, and are not imposed on by vague, loose or ambiguous terms. (Mill 1973 ch. 1 p. 13).

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Project Report:

## **Introductory Formal Logic: Why do we do it?**

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**Helen Beebee**

*Centre for Philosophy*

*Department of Government*

*University of Manchester*

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### 1. Introduction

Introductory formal logic (IFL) courses are notoriously problematic. On the one hand, most philosophy departments regard such courses as incorporating the kind of basic training that any student serious about studying philosophy to degree level needs to have. On the other hand, a significant proportion of such students find formal logic to be difficult, uninspiring, apparently pointless, and, well, too much like the GCSE Maths they struggled through. Failure rates tend to be high, and many students who battled unsuccessfully with IFL in their first year carry a kind of logic-phobia with them through their degree course, breaking out in a cold sweat at the merest glimpse of an upside-down 'A'.

Some students don't even get that far: in the past few years I have had a handful of first year philosophy students switch degree programmes within a few weeks of arriving at University solely so that they can escape the torture of a whole year of formal logic.

IFL courses raise financial issues too. Many philosophy departments make their first year philosophy modules available to non-philosophy students across the university, and make a significant amount of money from attracting large numbers of students onto these modules. Perhaps not surprisingly, IFL courses tend to have significantly less pulling power.

Given all these disadvantages, do we drop IFL, or make it optional, or move it to the second year of the degree course, when philosophy students have become a captive audience? Or do we dig our heels in, insisting on the 'essential basic training' role of IFL and swallowing the consequences?

Of course, there are steps one can take to alleviate the negative impact of first-year IFL courses, through the methods by which those

courses are taught and assessed. My concern in this article, however, will be with curriculum rather than methodological issues. In quality-speak, I am interested in whether, or to what extent the learning outcomes delivered by IFL courses contribute to or enhance students' ability to meet the learning outcomes for philosophy degree programmes as a whole.

I will argue that IFL is indeed essential basic training for aspiring philosophy students, but that the focus ought to be on the 'basic'. The levels of skill and knowledge of formal logic required for students to have sufficient grounding for later philosophy courses are much lower than many current IFL modules and text books seem to presuppose. Moreover, I shall argue that some important skills that one might expect IFL courses to inculcate in students are much better taught in, or in conjunction with, a course on critical thinking.

A word is in order about the general focus of philosophy degrees. Much of what I say later in this article presupposes that students will go on to study, amongst other things, some recent and contemporary analytical philosophy. As will become clear, some aspects of the 'essential basic training' provided by IFL are explicitly a matter of preparation for studying that kind of philosophy. To put it bluntly, much analytical philosophy produced over the last hundred years or so is infused with the language and ideals of first-order predicate logic. Basic knowledge and understanding of first-order predicate logic is essential to understanding that kind of philosophy, but that understanding may well be considerably less important in degree programmes that do not include a significant amount of analytical philosophy. Nonetheless, the basic moral of this article still applies—namely, that one needs to think carefully about whether, or to what extent IFL courses deliver skills and knowledge that are relevant to the kinds of skill and knowledge that students need to have in order to understand and engage with the philosophical texts and problems they will confront in the rest of their philosophy courses.

What follows is driven by two empirical generalisations about first-year philosophy students. First, as I have already said, a significant proportion of them loathe and despise IFL. Fear and loathing can be reduced by good teaching and assessment methods, of course. But a major problem with IFL is that a natural and, unfortunately, common reaction amongst such students is to bury their heads in the sand and hope that the whole horrific ordeal will somehow go away. So they tend to be the students who skip classes, fail to do the background reading

and practice exercises, fail to submit assignments, and so on. In other words, those students simply do not avail themselves of the kinds of opportunity that any amount of good teaching practice will present them with.

Second, a relatively large proportion of students—including, but larger than the group just mentioned—simply do not learn very much in IFL. I have frequently encountered a sea of blank looks from second and third year classes after asking a question like ‘Quine says that to be is to be the value of a variable. What *is* a variable?’ Or ‘What does this mean:  $(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ ?’

These empirical claims, if true, are significant because they entail that a large proportion of the harder material taught in IFL courses is simply ignored or quickly forgotten by a lot of students—in fact the majority, I would guess. If that is right, then it is appropriate to ask whether teaching harder material is worth the cost—the cost of spending valuable teaching time attempting to get students to master material that many of them will simply ignore or fail to grasp.

The reader may suspect at this point that I am going to be suggesting that IFL courses should be ‘dumbed down’. That is indeed exactly what I am going to do. This is not because students are on average less bright or less hard-working than they once were. I doubt whether there are many students in my logic class who are incapable, given enough support and guidance, of mastering logic. But by and large, philosophy departments do not have the resources available to make such support and guidance possible (something that is made especially difficult given the ostrich-like tendencies described above). So the fact—if it is a fact—that all or most students are in principle capable of grasping the harder material, given ideal circumstances, does not provide justification for teaching it to them in quite different circumstances.

In other words, if we concentrate on what students actually learn from IFL courses, rather than what we attempt to teach them, it is clear that a majority of students do not get far beyond the basics anyway. For those students, cutting the harder material would not result in any loss at all; indeed, they may well benefit from the less intimidating nature of the course and actually learn more. True, students who *can* do the harder stuff will come away with less ability in and knowledge of formal logic. I do not wish to suggest that the harder material they lose out on should not be taught at all; all I want to do is question whether a compulsory course is the place to inculcate that knowledge, or whether instead that material might be better taught in an optional course later on so that

students who are less good at or interested in formal logic are not made to suffer needlessly.

## 2. The content of IFL courses

IFL courses and text books typically focus on three main areas:

- (a) *Languages' of logic*: Typically propositional logic (PL) and quantificational logic (QL)—though some courses and books also cover modal logic, Aristotelian logic, etc. Learning the language typically consists partly in learning what the symbols mean (e.g. learning the truth tables for the connectives in PL), and partly in learning how to translate between sentences of PL or QL and sentences of English.
- (b) *Proof systems*: Standardly some combination of truth-table methods for PL, and truth-tree, axiomatic and natural deduction systems for PL and QL.
- (c) *Meta-logic*: Soundness and completeness of formal systems, the limits of formalisation, and so on.

In each case, of course, there are in principle huge differences in how much is taught and what level of proficiency students are expected to reach. In the case of (a), students might just learn PL and QL, or more. They might be taught only very basic translation ('all Fs are Gs', 'some Fs are not Gs', etc.) or be expected to grasp quite complex formulas involving relations, multiple quantifiers, employing Russell's Theory of Descriptions, and so on. With (b), students might just learn one method of proof or several, and might be expected to construct very complex 30-line proofs or just basic ones. With (c), teachers might confine themselves to the odd interesting remark, or might actually teach students some formal results.

## 3. What should compulsory IFL courses aim to achieve?

I am going to baldly state two fundamental and overarching aims that an IFL course ought to have:

- A1** A general understanding of the logic of philosophical argument.
- A2** A basic understanding of and competence in PL and QL.



*A1: Understanding the logic of philosophical argument*

The basic methodology of analytical philosophy is that of argument. During their philosophy degree, students learn (we hope) how to defend and attack philosophical theses—that is, to construct arguments for or against those theses. Of course, there is much more to analytic philosophy than this; but the basic principles of argument construction and evaluation lie at the heart of many of the philosophical skills we expect students to acquire. IFL ought to play a role in developing those skills; I shall come to the issue of how it might do so later.

*A2: PL and QL*

It is a fact of life that some of the material we want students to be able to read and understand later in their degree will contain some element of formalisation. The formalisation involved can be pretty basic (a statement of Tarski's T-schema, say, or the use of basic QL formulas in a discussion of the problem of induction or the paradoxes of confirmation); or, of course, it can be more advanced (Russell on the Theory of Descriptions, for example). IFL is the most obvious place to teach students the formalisation they need in order to understand this kind of thing—although I shall argue later that IFL is not necessarily the *right* place to teach this more advanced material.

There is also a more general reason to ensure that students are familiar with the basics of PL and QL—touched on earlier—which is the huge influence they have had on the development of 20<sup>th</sup> Century analytical philosophy. Consider, for example, Quine's criterion of ontological commitment and much of the ensuing debate about the metaphysics of properties. Or the analysis of dispositions, and laws of nature, and indicative and counterfactual conditionals. The issue here is not simply to do with being able to understand what the authors are saying, but also with being able to appreciate why they are saying it.

#### 4. How can IFL achieve these aims?

Supposing that *A1* and *A2* do indeed represent the two overarching aims a compulsory IFL course should have, how much of the content of a typical IFL course—the kind of content outlined in §2—serves those aims? The answer, I claim, is: not much. Consider *A1*. How exactly does sequent-proving, for example, serve that aim? Well, I think natural deduction systems do serve that aim, at least in principle and to some extent. Any philosophical argument, however informally stated, will take

the form of a *reductio*, or *modus tollens*, or *modus ponens*, or conditional proof, or or-elimination, and/or make use of universal or existential introduction or elimination. Getting students to understand the formal mechanics of those rules, and why they work, is important for setting them on the road to understanding the structure of real philosophical arguments as they occur in the kinds of texts they will read and tutorial discussions they will have.

By contrast, it is not at all clear to me that sequent-proving by other means—in particular truth-tree or truth-table methods—helps to any great extent to realise *A1*. Focussing, as they do, merely on the semantic notion of validity, they do not illuminate the nature of inference. Demonstrating whether or not it is impossible for the premises of an argument to be true while its conclusion is false can, of course, be a useful way of demonstrating whether or not an argument is valid—and of course this is something that students need to learn. But it shows us nothing about the internal structure of an existing argument, nor does it suggest how one might go about constructing an argument of one's own.

Even given a natural-deduction method of proof, there are some caveats. First, there is a limit to how good students need to be at sequent-proving in order to get the point about the nature and mechanics of the rules of inference. Second, I do not think that teaching students formal proof procedures in isolation from real-life English-language arguments actually teaches them very much about the logic of philosophical argument. I said above that any philosophical argument will take the form of a *reductio* or *modus tollens* or whatever. In my experience, this is very far from obvious for the majority of students. Learning how such rules work in a formal setting is an important step on the way, but students generally will not draw connections with the kinds of philosophical argument that they are presented with in other philosophy classes unless they are explicitly shown the connection and get used to looking at or constructing philosophical arguments in that light.

For example, I recently set an IFL exam question asking students to identify the main rule of inference used in the following argument:

If God exists, he is omniscient, benevolent and all-powerful. There is evil in the world. Suppose that God exists. Then, being omniscient, he knows there is evil in the world. Being all-powerful, he could have prevented that suffering. But he has not prevented it. This is incompatible with the claim that he is benevolent. So God does not exist.

Only about 10-15% of students correctly identified the main rule of inference as *reductio ad absurdum*—far smaller than the proportion who could use RAA competently in a formal proof.

What about *A2*? Well, precisely how much PL and QL they need to master ought to depend on what they are going to be taught later in their degree. Given this basic principle, the question of how much they need to know is not one that can be answered in isolation. For students in departments with a predominantly analytical focus, the very basic structure of QL is a minimum. Students who are not reasonably comfortable with talk of (and at least some use of formal notation for) predicates, singular terms, quantification, conditional statements, and so on are going to find a lot of recent analytical philosophy—particularly philosophy of language, philosophy of science, philosophical logic, and metaphysics—very heavy going; and most students in such departments are going to be unable to avoid at least one such course.

Is this enough, or should the bare-minimum bar be set higher? Well, as I say, it depends. For example, at Manchester, some students come across Russell's Theory of Descriptions in a second-year course on 20<sup>th</sup> Century analytical philosophy. For this reason, I originally taught enough QL in the first-year IFL module to be able to introduce them to the Theory of Descriptions. However, it took a good couple of weeks to get from basic quantified formulas to this point, since one needs, in addition, to introduce them to identity and to formulas with multiple quantifiers. And when subsequently taking tutorials for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century analytical philosophy course, it was clear that very few students had actually grasped or could remember any of this harder material. Putting this together with the fact that only about a third to a half of our philosophy students—and very few of the non-philosophy students—actually take the 20<sup>th</sup> Century course, it was clear that it was simply not worth spending a significant chunk of the IFL course attempting to teach them the extra material.

Here, then, is a bald suggestion about what needs to be taught in a compulsory IFL course (given certain assumptions about degree programme curricula which, needless to say, do not hold universally), under the headings introduced in § 2, in order to realise aims *A1* and *A2*.

(a) *Languages of logic*: Basic PL and QL, with the emphasis on 'basic'. Students don't generally need to be able to construct a 16-row truth table, or learn how to say 'there are at most two cats on the mat' in QL, or to tell a symmetric relation from a reflexive one.

It is also worthwhile getting students to appreciate that different logical languages succeed to different extents in capturing the logical form of English, lest they attempt (as a student of mine once told me he was going to do) to translate the *Tractatus* into PL in order to see whether or not its arguments are valid.

(b) *Proof systems*: Junk the truth-trees and concentrate on natural deduction. But don't make them do proofs that are twenty lines long. They don't need to be able to prove theorems either.

(c) *Meta-logic*: Students do need to understand the semantic notion of validity, and it is certainly worth getting them to understand that the rules of inference are truth-preserving. (After all, this is what gives the rules their normative character.) But they don't need to even know what soundness and completeness are: the chances are that most of them will never even come across these expressions again

It is perhaps worth stressing again that my point is not that students ought not to be taught any of the things I have excluded from the list. The point is rather that, insofar as there are any good reasons at all to teach such things in an IFL course, those reasons are likely to be outweighed by the reasons not to—reasons I outlined in §1.

## IFL and Critical Thinking

Another good reason to strip the formal material down to a bare minimum is that it frees up valuable teaching time, which can be used to teach beginning philosophy students skills that are much more obviously going to be useful to them. In this section I give one example—argument reconstruction—and argue that teaching this skill will increase the likelihood that the teaching of natural deduction will in fact realise aim *A1*.

I claimed above that one of the two central aims—*A1*—of an IFL course should be to improve students' understanding of the logic of philosophical argument. However, I also claimed that the scope for achieving this aim was much more narrow than one might think, and that, insofar as that aim can be realised by learning about formal proofs at all, the possibility of achieving the aim, if one concentrates solely on formal inferences in isolation from actual English-language arguments, is severely restricted.

It is not hard to see why this is so, when one considers the huge gulf that exists between the content and logical structure of arguments (in QL, say) whose validity can be proved by formal methods, and the content and structure of the kinds of arguments that students will have come across in ordinary life.

Consider, for example, the following argument, taken from Anne Thomson, *Critical Reasoning: A Practical Introduction* (2nd edition), London: Routledge, p.35 (I have changed ‘could’ to ‘would’ in the first sentence, and numbered the sentences):

(\*) (i) Allowing parents to choose the sex of their children would have serious social costs. (ii) There would be a higher percentage of males who were unable to find a female partner. Also, (iii) since it is true that 90 per cent of violent crimes are committed by men, the number of violent crimes would rise.

Now, what connection is, say, a first-year student with no training in the systematic analysis of arguments likely to discern between this argument and the arguments they come across in the context of formal proof procedures? Well, they will probably recognise (\*) as an argument, and (i) as its conclusion. So far so good. They will probably also claim that (ii) and (iii) are premises, which isn’t *completely* wrong, but is a long way from being adequate. In fact, a lot of work needs to be done before one is in a position to be able to reconstruct (\*) in such a way that it has clear premises upon which one can bring identifiable rules of inference to bear. Try it.

My reconstruction has six premises. Three are unstated in (\*), and the remaining three are gleaned from but do not obviously resemble (i) and (ii). The conclusion gets to follow via several applications of *modus ponens* together with one application of conditional proof—ignoring the inconvenient fact that all the conditionals are counterfactual rather than indicative.

Now ask yourself how much of what you just did is something you could reasonably expect a first-year student with no experience of this sort of thing to be able to do. The answer—quite clearly, I think—is: not very much at all. A fair number might notice that there is an implicit premise that, given the choice, most parents would choose boys rather than girls (though of course they would not know to call it an implicit premise). But I do not think many students would be able to get much further than that. (Incidentally, when I set this as a question for my first year class, a significant minority thought that the argument was

presupposing that men who do not have a female partner are more likely to commit violent crimes.)

The point I am making here is that a fairly sophisticated grasp of the nature of ordinary English arguments is needed in order for someone to be in a position to recognise those arguments, as they ordinarily appear (in conversation or in newspapers, say) as arguments that bear any relationship at all to the kinds of argument, in the language of PL or QL, that students get to learn how to prove by formal methods. (For instance, in the above example, the rules of inference that get you from the premises to the conclusion are *modus ponens* and conditional proof. But notice that (\*) itself, as stated, does not even contain anything that has an explicitly conditional form.)

Grant that one aim of IFL is *A1*—promoting understanding of the structure of philosophical arguments. While IFL can undoubtedly do this, its effectiveness will be greatly enhanced if it is taught after or in conjunction with instruction in the art of what commonly goes under the heading ‘critical thinking’. If you look at typical critical thinking text books, a large part of what they do is teach students how to take an English argument and reconstruct it so that its implicit premises are made explicit, and so that it is clear how the conclusion is supposed to follow from those premises.

The skill thus inculcated is, of course, valuable in its own right: it enables students to get a critical grip on arguments by focussing on what they (often implicitly) assume and on whether the conclusion follows from or is reasonable in the light of those assumptions. It also encourages them to appreciate how important (and, often, difficult) it is to state their own arguments clearly and precisely, so that the premises are made explicit and carefully individuated and the reasoning is straightforward. But this is a skill which, in turn, can turn sequent-proving in IFL from a fun game/form of torture (delete as appropriate), with little obvious application, into an idealised but nonetheless recognisable way of understanding and articulating the principles of proper reasoning that we want students to adopt when they read and think about philosophical problems and write their essay.

Project Report:

# Critical Thinking and International Postgraduate Students

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**Zoë Bennett Moore, Lucia Faltin and Melanie Wright**

*Anglia Polytechnic University: Cambridge Theological Federation and Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge*

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**‘With a one year MA, you just have to hope you can learn bloody fast.’**

**(student from New Zealand)**

## 1. Introduction

What do we mean by critical thinking? There are broad assumptions in the UK educational context that it includes identifying, interpreting, analysing and evaluating arguments. But do international learners share these definitions? If they do not, how far can we encourage them to develop ‘our’ type of critical thinking? Is such teaching desirable? Do the approaches to teaching and learning in other countries raise questions about our understanding of what critical thinking is, and about its value for learners who are interested in co-operation, creativity, and dialogue?

This paper results from a PRS-LTSN funded research project, which examined the definition and place of critical thought in postgraduate programmes in Religious Studies and Theology. Although many of the questions raised are not unique to international learners, the study focuses on their experience, especially in relation to taught Masters programmes. In our own practice, we have found that many international learners are educated in systems with values other than the critical thinking which forms such a strong element of both the generic skills and the specific learning outcomes assumed to be essential to Masters level work in the UK. So, focusing on international learners’ experiences throws our assumptions into sharp relief, whilst at the same time suggesting strategies and insights that could be used with many students in the field.

## 1.1 Why it matters

There are several reasons why it is important to think about critical thinking. Significantly, as MacDonald Ross highlighted recently, in 2003-2004 institutions will be required to implement the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) qualifications frameworks, which attempt to define and standardise the achievements and attributes represented by each of the main higher education qualification titles.<sup>1</sup> The word 'critical' appears frequently in the descriptors of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, as do references to a range of activities commonly associated with critical thinking. For example, the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland's descriptors for qualification at Degree (non-Honours) level require students to demonstrate a 'critical understanding' of principles and subject-matter, and the 'ability to evaluate critically' approaches to problem-solving. At Masters level, students should engage in critical self-reflection and evaluate critically 'methodologies', and 'current research and advanced scholarship' in the discipline. Since implementation of the descriptors will require us to demonstrate that all students (including international learners) awarded a qualification have met these outcomes, it is important that we articulate our understanding of 'critical thinking' and its development and practice in particular subject contexts.<sup>2</sup>

The prevalence of critical thinking language in the QAA frameworks resonates with a wider, growing interest in critical thinking in the UK. For example, in 2001 Critical Thinking was introduced as an Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification; in 2002 pupils wishing to achieve Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs, which supersede Special papers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) had the option of sitting an examination in Critical Thinking. Whilst the latter do not (in theory) require additional teaching, the introduction of these qualifications implies that it is possible to identify widely agreed definitions of critical thinking, and also that critical thinking is teachable, either explicitly (as in preparation for AS examination) or indirectly, in the course of teaching other subjects (as 'preparation' for the AEA). The implications of these developments—and of the qualifications frameworks—remain to be

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<sup>1</sup> G. MacDonald Ross, 'Information Article: External Pressures on Teaching,' *PRS-LTSN Journal* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter 2002), pp. 98-103.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crbtwork/nqf/ewni2001\\_textonly.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crbtwork/nqf/ewni2001_textonly.htm)

for a printer-friendly version of the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Site current in September 2002.



worked out. But the likelihood is that UK students will enter and progress through higher education having received increasingly coherent and uniform grounding in critical thinking. Concomitant with this UK tendency to standardization (at least at a rhetorical level) is the potential for the gap to widen between UK understandings of critical thinking and the expectations and experiences of international learners, who come from contexts where different definitions of critical thinking operate, or from places where critical thinking is not fostered or rewarded academically. Ironically, in 2004—the precise moment that the qualifications frameworks claim we will be able to generalise about the critical thinking skills and competencies of UK students—EU enlargement will facilitate a growth in the numbers of central and eastern European students taking courses in the UK. As this paper illustrates, students from EU candidate countries (for example Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland) will bring with them markedly different experiences of teaching, learning and assessment. The increasingly diversified and international body of students who embark on taught Masters programmes today requires us to examine our own teaching practices in a self-critical manner.

## 1.2. What is critical thinking? Some brief notes

One of the findings of this study is that there is no universally agreed definition of critical thinking. Moreover, single definitions rarely go far enough in specifying the depth and breadth of what critical thinking entails. This section summarises some approaches to defining critical thinking, but should not be understood in isolation. Throughout the article, we continue to address the task of describing and exploring what we mean by critical thinking.

Many descriptions of critical thinking focus on a list of thinking skills associated with the handling of argument. For example, one typical list of critical thinking skills includes the ability to:

- identify reasons;
- evaluate reasoning of different kinds, including common and important species of reasoning;
- recognise and evaluate assumptions;
- clarify expressions and ideas;

- produce reasoning appropriate to a given task.<sup>3</sup>

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) modifies this definition slightly when it describes critical thinking as ‘a form of reflective reasoning that uses a combination of skills, attitudes and information of knowledge, which facilitates good judgement and is sensitive to context.’<sup>4</sup> It moves away from the potentially mechanistic practices listed above (critical thinking is ‘reflective’) and acknowledges the cultural constructedness of thinking forms (critical thinking is ‘sensitive to context’).

One of the broadest understandings of critical thinking is offered by Barnett. He argues that the predominantly skills based approach to critical thinking is producing ‘critical thinking without a critical edge’<sup>5</sup>—a kind of ‘painting-by-numbers’ approach to academic work, which cannot deliver the freeing of the mind that the rhetoric surrounding critical thinking often promises. As part of his effort to see critical thinking developed, Barnett argues for a shift from skills-based language to a discussion of the university’s role in the development of critical *being*. This entails:

- fostering critical thought so that students move beyond the practice of ‘intellectual games’ and are liberated, to realize that ‘they are free to build their own cognitive universe’;
- modifying the pedagogical relationship, so that the teacher becomes a participant in a *joint* inquiry after truth;
- empowering students to understand themselves critically and to act critically, so that they are ‘not subject to the world’ but are able to ‘act autonomously and purposively within it.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These are the Specification Aims of the OCR’s Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Critical Thinking (3821). Other lists are given in A. Fisher and M. Scriven *Critical Thinking: Its Definition and Assessment*, Norwich: Edgepress and Centre for Research in Critical Thinking, University of East Anglia, 1997, chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in ‘Critical Thinking AEA Trial Examination. Projecritical thinking Summary. September 2001,’ National Foundation for Educational Research at [http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/outcome\\_popup.asp?theID=CTA](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/outcome_popup.asp?theID=CTA). Site current in September 2002.

<sup>5</sup> R. Barnett, *Higher Education: A Critical Business*, Buckingham: The Society for Research into Education and Open University, 1997, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Barnett, *Higher Education*, p. 4.

These three accounts differ in their conceptualisation of critical thinking. Their emphases and implications will be returned to throughout the article. At this stage, however, it is worth noting two points. First, it is clear that whichever definition is operative, critical thinking requires considerable time to develop and practise. This is a significant factor to bear in mind when considering the situation of international learners enrolled on taught postgraduate programmes, who may be studying in the UK for a very short period of time (nine or twelve months). Second (as will be returned to in the conclusion) ideas about critical thinking are profoundly political. They may be predicated on assumptions about human society and individuality that international learners (and perhaps this is especially true of those working in Religious Studies and Theology?) do not share or value.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 The research context

The research focuses on the experience of international students enrolled in two taught Masters programmes. The MA Pastoral Theology is part of a portfolio of courses offered by the Cambridge Theological Federation, (which comprises seven member- and two associate-institutions involved primarily in initial and continuing ministerial and theological education). 240 students are currently studying for the MA, including 16 international learners. The other programme is the MA in Jewish-Christian Relations, taught in Cambridge and by distance learning (via the Internet and by correspondence) by the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations. It has 84 registered students, of whom 21 are international (11 of these are distance learners and may visit the UK rarely or never during their MA studies). The programmes are validated by Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) as part of its policy of collaborative and regional partnerships, and they share both a common modular structure, and some teaching, especially in the area of study skills provision.

The characteristics of our research context have implications for our approach and findings. First, both programmes are of course primarily academic. They are subject to the processes of review and assessment that apply to other courses at Anglia Polytechnic University and in the UK higher education sector generally (for example, Quality Assurance Agency review). Second, many of the students on our programmes possess some kind of religious affiliation. The Pastoral Theology MA is aimed at those engaged in Christian ministry;

involvement in this is a criterion for admission. The Jewish-Christian Relations programme does not require or pre-suppose an affiliation, but experience indicates that many students, including many international students, are members of a faith community. The same could be said of many UK programmes in Theology and Religious Studies. The profile of our international students further complicates the investigation of their attitudes towards and experiences of critical thinking. Are the challenges which they face rooted in differences which are individual, cultural, theological, denominational, or inter-religious?<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2. Research design and implementation

The research project grew out of our reflection on the experiences of teaching and managing the two postgraduate programmes, and was conducted during the 2001-2002 academic year. Having formulated some initial ideas about critical thinking and our international learners, we held a focus group meeting with new and continuing international MA students (we approached all international students; those who volunteered to participate in the research came from Russia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, Israel, Canada, and USA<sup>8</sup>). This meeting was divided into two main sections. The first took the form of an unstructured group interview, whilst in the second, students were asked to reflect on their experiences of study in a more structured way, through the completion and discussion of a written exercise. This generated a substantial quantity of useful material, some of which echoed our own insights, and some of which was new to us. An explanatory and consultative meeting was held with tutors on the MA programmes (classroom based and distance learning versions). This enabled us to compare student experience with tutor perception, and to identify the kinds of strategies that tutors are already deploying on an *ad hoc* basis in their work with international learners. At the same time, questionnaires were used to elicit ideas and information from international graduates of our programmes and from distance learners unable to travel to Cambridge.

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<sup>7</sup> F. Morgan Gillman, 'Ask and You Shall Find Out: Some Multicultural Dynamics in Catholic Theological Education,' *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Vol. 3 No. 3 (2000), pp. 152-156 discusses similar issues in a North American context.

<sup>8</sup> While the Pastoral Theology programme does have some students from Africa, none responded to our request to participate in the research. This may in part reflect difficulties in electronic communication experienced by African students who have returned to their home country. We are convinced that a study which included African students would yield further interesting and significant material that would complement the current research. Such a study might require differences in methodology.

Our original intention was to move next to the development and piloting of a programme of intensive study skills (broadly defined) development with a self-selecting group of international learners. This would form the basis of a more extensive programme of action, implemented across the MA programmes in 2002-2003 academic year. However, as we collated the findings from the meetings and questionnaire, and brought these into dialogue with existing research on critical thinking, we realised that it was neither feasible nor profitable to pursue the research plan as initially devised. The issues which emerged in the meetings were too complex and subtle to be translated so rapidly into finalised action plans. We realised that both the development of higher level critical thinking, and the delivery of quality support to international students, were in no small part matters of institutional culture. It takes time to foster a context in which students from different academic and religious backgrounds can feel able to risk failure and experiment with new ideas. In the first year of the research project, it has been feasible for us to consult with staff, and thereby to do some consciousness raising work with them. It is also feasible for us to develop some concrete strategies for implementation at the induction stage. But a further year of work is needed to address the issues for teaching and learning in sufficient depth, across the programmes.

Like all methodologies, ours is open to critique. For example, the focus on just two programmes, and the kinds of interview data that we have collected, makes it hard for us to generalise about the experience of international learners on postgraduate programmes elsewhere in the UK. However, there is a positive value in the responsible collection and sharing of even fairly anecdotal data. Doing this at the very least heightens attention to the cultural dynamics in our own classes, and leads us to be more deliberate and more specific about processes and method in the teaching of Theology and Religious Studies. Our conversations with and within professional bodies and groups also suggests that our findings are not in fact unrepresentative.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the Learning and Teaching Unit, Anglia Polytechnic University, ACATE (Association of Centres for Adult Theological Education) and ILTHE (Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education).

### 3. Findings Overview

Our findings focus on three areas, reflecting the key stages of the international student's relationship with their higher education institution in the UK: *pre-course* recruitment and induction; *studies in the UK*; *return to the home country*.

#### 3.1. Pre-course

The UK is one of the major destinations for students from around the world and international learners opt to study here for a variety of reasons.<sup>10</sup> For example, some are motivated by the perceived quality and standing of UK qualifications in the learner's home country. Others wish to pursue a specialism not offered elsewhere. (For example, one student indicates that she opted to study in the UK because the courses available seemed to offer more chances to 'do more practical things' than a postgraduate course in her native Germany would have done.) Particularly at postgraduate level, the availability of scholarships may be a major factor motivating some applicants. This diversity of motivations is matched by a range of levels of knowledge of UK education and culture. In fact, the material gathered in our interviews suggested that most students arrived in the UK with comparatively little knowledge of living and studying here. Some reported a kind of academic or educational 'culture shock' when they arrived. One student observed, 'In the UK, the educational approach and the religious perspective are totally different. In Russia, you can ask questions, but this happens within boundaries.'

It is therefore important that the induction of international learners begins prior to arrival in the UK. (In the case of distance learners who will not travel to the UK, but will study a course designed, delivered and assessed within a UK framework, induction should begin a few weeks before the course start-date.)

The pre-arrival stage should be carefully, and as far as possible, individually designed. For example, students who were offered the possibility of email contacts with a mentor—a programme graduate from his or her own country—invariably accepted the offer and found it extremely worthwhile. This kind of individualised induction is an effective means of bridging the UK and home contexts between which the student will move during the next twelve months or so. Almost all

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<sup>10</sup> See Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom, *Briefing Note: International Students in UK Higher Education*, London: CVCP, 1998, para. 1.

UK institutions produce some kind of written guide for international applicants, typically covering: the UK academic system; accommodation and living expenses; travel advice; immigration and health insurance requirements. They may also discuss language requirements and support, and outline process issues relating to study (e.g. attendance requirements and enrolment procedures).<sup>11</sup> However, this information will need augmenting. It may be aimed primarily at undergraduates, rather than postgraduate students. It is also likely to say little about specific academic expectations and the experience of studying particular subjects.

Issues relating to language and culture have emerged as important to cover with international students enrolling on taught postgraduate programmes in Religious Studies and Theology, and are discussed in detail below. Also significant for some students is the perhaps new experience of living and studying in a context of pluralism. UK society is diverse (far more diverse than international stereotypes of 'the English' imply) and UK universities and colleges have by and large embraced the values of pluralism. Many international learners may come from societies which are less diverse than the UK (or societies in which diversity takes different forms). Alternatively, they may be 'used to' certain types of diversity but not others (e.g. ethnic but not religious diversity, or vice versa). This type of 'difference' is particularly noticeable within Religious and Theological studies. For example, one student from Poland reported surprise on learning that in most UK universities, staff teaching Religion or Theology are not required to be members of a particular church. Similarly, a student from Israel was initially concerned about the experience of living and studying in a country whose majority population was not Jewish: would this be a broadening experience, or a frightening one? Helping students to negotiate pluralism takes time but is necessary if the student's experience is not to be marked by a series of disturbing and puzzlingly 'chaotic' moments.

### 3.2. Studies in the UK

Our informants confirmed that international learners are used to a variety of teaching and learning styles. They are best illustrated by impressions expressed respectively by an Israeli and Hungarian on-site student, and a distance learner from Canada:

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the *APU Guide for International Applicants, 2001-2002*, Anglia Polytechnic University, 2001.

There are so few courses [classroom sessions] here, and more time working by yourself, more independence ... In Israel, you would feel more bothered by “people” than by “studies”. Here, I am more focused on research than on the demands made by the teachers.

At home we write fewer essays and have more oral exams ... I didn't spend so much time in libraries....there were textbooks for every course ... How do UK students do it? *Have* they learned how to read texts ...?

In Canada/US, marks are given for a variety of work, including participation, analysis, critical thinking, originality, group work, etc ... Difference in terminology was also confusing.

As is explored later, many of these differences have implications for the international learners' practice of critical thinking in the UK. Moreover, it is not simply the case that students may be struggling to adapt to *new* teaching and learning methods in the UK context. Some students who were used to oral assessment in their home country were not comfortable with this type of assessment in the UK. Our Hungarian and Russian informants said they found this kind of semi-formal group communication difficult, believing that domestic students could 'waffle without hitting the point', an 'easy option' not open to non-native speakers. They also feared that in the follow-up discussion, they were not 'pushed' as hard as their UK peers, and so had fewer chances to shine in front of an assessor: 'English people may disagree, but fear rocking the boat, or think “she comes from a difficult place”, so I don't get as much feedback as I would like.'

Our research further revealed that comparatively little attention is given to the international learner's return to his or her home country, and to the specific challenges associated in retaining links with international *alumni*. There are several reasons why it is important to attend to this aspect of student experience, in general terms, and also vis-à-vis the practice and development of critical thinking.

Students regularly report a concern that their UK qualification is of uncertain value at home. One student writes, 'In Germany nothing from the things I did over here will be recognised. It just does not count. It is like a year off.' In a different vein, one student from New Zealand observes, 'I get some opportunities to speak both in the church and publicly ... My “Cambridge MA” (rightly or wrongly) gives me extra credibility.' Whether correct or (more likely) incorrect, how students



*perceive* their time in the UK will be evaluated in the future will affect their state of mind during the course itself.

Some students express the fear that coming to the UK may be seen as a 'betrayal of loyalty' to one's home department or professor. A year abroad make take them out of a patronage system, and make future studies, scholarships, etc., harder to organise. Like worries about the recognition of a UK qualification, these fears may de-motivate the international learner, and impact negatively on his or her performance whilst here. It is therefore important to address these issues, even at the induction stages. Students should be encouraged to articulate how a year abroad fits in with their longer term study and career plans, and where possible to retain occasional email contacts with an interested teacher in their home department, whilst they are in the UK. In this way the successful reintegration of the student into his or her home life and education is more likely.

The need to attend to students' experience both before the course and afterwards highlights the extent to which successful *inter-institutional relations* are important in determining the quality of international learners' experiences in taught postgraduate programmes.

At the recruitment stage, some UK institutions (including our own) rely on international partner organisations to assist with the selection of suitable candidates. But do these partners identify those students best suited to study in the UK context? Our findings on the different teaching and learning styles prevalent in various countries, and on the place they give to critical thinking, suggest that learners who have fared well in a context where critical thinking is differently defined, or actively *dis*-couraged, may not be those best suited to UK learning and teaching styles. In order to select learners who can demonstrate not just academic attainment in their home context, but also the potential to cross educational cultures successfully, deeper links need to be developed between UK departments and their international recruiting agents.

Negotiating the student's return to their home country can also be helped or hindered by a willingness or reluctance to work with partner organisations. Like many taught postgraduate programmes, we do not have large numbers of international graduates in any individual country. However, a meaningful sense of ongoing community can be constructed even when numbers are small. A number of British Council branches are willing to facilitate such activities, and at the very least,

typically provide libraries and Internet access, so that *alumni* email groups and joint study or research projects are increasingly practical options.

### 3.2.1 Induction

The following section further elaborates on the experience of international students during their studies in the UK, with focus on induction, teaching and learning, and assessment.

Dear Chrissie.

I'm beginning to think your people were right to look doubtful about this place. It's so cold, oh Chrissie it's *so* cold. I'm always cold. They gave me a cold clothes allowance when I got to London (I must say they *are* generous and I *do* feel grateful—you can tell them that at your end—here there's nobody to tell), but I have to live on it till my first grant comes through ... They've also put the university on the top of a hill, just to make sure it's as windy and cold as possible. And it's quite a way from the town, and the only way you can go to town is on a bus, and the bus stop is underground, and I can't tell you how horrid it is down there—Oh dear. I stopped just now and tried to find something nice to say about this place but I swear I can't ... This is my sixth day here and I haven't talked to anyone except my supervisor for fifteen minutes on Wednesday ... I've started but I don't recognise any of the stuff I'm supposed to read—still, I suppose it will all fall into place ... I think all the people on my floor are on courses together because they all seem to know each other. We say 'Hi' politely in the kitchen and that's about it.<sup>12</sup>

Ahdaf Soueif vividly depicts Asya's arrival from Cairo to 'a university in the North of England' to do postgraduate study. Cold, loneliness, disorientation, cultural isolation, academic confusion—all stand out in this excerpt. We are alerted to the most basic conditions of life for many students coming to a foreign country, and it is no good our trying to work with people at the higher levels of cognitive development if we do not also attend to the material and emotional conditions which they are negotiating in their lives.

The induction of international students to a study programme is an ever-expanding circle of responsibilities and possibilities. It requires a more expansive *scope* than the induction of UK students, often involving substantial induction to social life, and attention to language issues. It also requires a more expansive *time* span. Clearly identified in student responses to our research is the need for guidance and help, which might

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<sup>12</sup> A. Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London: Bloomsbury 1992, pp. 335-336.

normally be associated only with an introductory period of orientation, to continue over a much longer period of time.

Our research indicates five significant issues. Induction of international students should:

- be *context-specific*;
- be *rooted in a social context* which enables deep rather than superficial possibilities of communication and personal involvement;
- be *thorough and comprehensive in its introduction to the academic expectations* placed on students;
- pay attention to issues of *language and communication*, which goes beyond the provision of separate language classes to integration within the context of the course, its seminars, its assignments and its informal aspects;
- be regarded as an *ongoing task* which is not completed in the first few days or weeks of the academic programme.

These five issues all have a direct bearing on the development and deployment of critical thinking. International students may have come from contexts where critical thinking is either not valued or, more likely, defined in a way different from normal UK expectations. For example, we found Canadian, German and Israeli students, who had extremely high levels of understanding about what was meant by critical thinking in their own context, but this differed from what was expected in ours<sup>13</sup> Explanation of expectation is therefore crucial. This is much better assimilated if given in an ongoing context of supervision and feedback rather than as an indigestible and deracinated 'lump' at the beginning of the programme. A student from Germany movingly commented,

What I really needed ... was somebody who would ... try to understand the differences in the way I was used to study in ... to the way they expected me to study in the UK. With that understanding I think a tutor could help me to overcome my difficulties and could help me learn how to reflect, how to develop independent ideas, what is okay and what is even too independent over here.

Social and communication issues also affect students at the deepest level, enabling or disabling confidence and concentration, peer discussion and

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<sup>13</sup> These definitions and differences are discussed further under 3.2.2. 'Teaching and Learning'.

presentation skills. Ready ability in these areas enhances both the development and the articulation of critical thinking. Finally, an appropriate understanding of the contextual and institutional factors determining a student's actual situation is an essential prerequisite to providing what is needed to support the development of critical thinking.

We shall now elaborate the five key issues outlined above. Induction of international students should be *context-specific*. Even within two closely related programmes such as ours, students recorded substantial differences in the helpfulness of the induction they were given. This correlated with differing structural and institutional arrangements. The Jewish-Christian Relations MA is run by the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations (CJCR), a small scale institution with a tightly knit structure of informal personal contact. The MA is offered both onsite and by distance learning. The Pastoral Theology MA is offered by the Cambridge Theological Federation, a more loosely knit group of colleges and courses, where much of the academic and tutorial guidance, and indeed the academic and social induction, is delegated to component institutions. A marked contrast was observed in the questionnaire replies between the CJCR distance learning student who reported excellent induction, the CJCR on-site student whose experience was primarily positive, and the student from an institution of the Federation who felt that induction to the MA had been inadequate. There are questions here both about what induction was given, but also about how that induction was received. There are questions about diversification of responsibility for induction, about focus in induction, and about the direct relatedness of induction to the task in hand. This diversity of student experience within two programmes, which work closely together, suggests to us that the *precise* institutional context and relatedness of the student is a significant factor. Close listening and attentiveness to the particular context of the student is important if we are to offer effective induction from which the student can receive full benefit.

Induction of international students should be *rooted in a social context* which enables deep rather than superficial possibilities of communication and personal involvement. 'The English are polite and don't want to offend'. This perceived politeness, however, conceals dangerous rocks. International students repeatedly bemoan their inability to dig beneath this polite exterior to understand what is really going on. What is she really thinking? Does he mean that invitation sincerely? What did they really think of my seminar paper? There are so many

subtleties and subtexts that reading and understanding what is going on becomes impossible.

This has implications for seminar style learning and for academic communication, but it also has important implications for the social induction of international students. Formal programmes of introduction to life in the UK are important; equally important are the informal social contacts among students and staff. Addressing issues of language and culture effectively requires specialist input from personal and academic tutors who are knowledgeable about the international student's home context. It is important to enter into a conversation with the student's background. This helps facilitate the transfer of skills and learning, including critical thinking, to the UK context. Some of the induction can be delivered via printed materials, but face to face sessions (or individualised email discussions) are also needed. Where possible, efforts should be made to accentuate the social dimension of the induction experience. Reflecting on the process of adapting to UK study methods, and in particular, the emphasis on independent learning at postgraduate level, a student from Germany reports:

I find this very difficult for a foreigner who has no contacts whatsoever in the UK, and who longs to meet people in lectures in order to get contacts, but is very much housebound with reading and studying books.

As this illustrates, the relatively low levels of class contact time typical in most UK MA programmes result in equally few ready opportunities for international learners to come together with their peers. Planning special social activities for international learners to meet (as a distinct group, and with other learners) can help them to make friends and in effect construct an informal support network, to which they can turn when experiencing problems. It is within a rich and healthy context of social meeting that deep learning is enabled. Without it the international student feels isolated, sometimes depressed, unsure of their ground, and lonely. Such conditions do not allow dialogue and growth in learning through the sharing of ideas and the testing of critical perspectives. As Barnett points out, 'the development of critical reason calls for the development of whole persons'. Moreover, '[a] critical higher education has to be sensitive ... to the social character of thought. Criticality is both social and personal.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Barnett, *Higher Education*, pp 22 and 48.

Low levels of class and social contact time do not offer opportunities to approach staff or fellow students with basic questions and misunderstandings. Such things are often discovered and set right ‘accidentally’. Formal procedures for consultation are more daunting; their possibility may indeed also be missed by international students in the welter of information overload.

Furthermore, the learning is not all on the side of the international students. Good social contacts allow the perspectives which international students *bring* to the UK academic context to be appreciated in their own right. The values, the methods and the justifications of a diversity of perspectives may be naturally shared in a non-threatening context. UK students may gain a critical perspective on their own academic ways; international students may gain the self-confidence to share their insights further in more formal contexts.

Induction of international students should be *thorough and comprehensive in its introduction to the academic expectations* placed on students. ‘Academic expectations’ in this context covers a wide range of phenomena. There is the question of what happens in the classroom. The students in our focus group spoke of previous experiences enormously different from what met them in their MA classes in the UK—of high classroom contact time spent entirely taking notes till ‘people get blistered hands’ and of regular tests in class on the reading and work of previous weeks. What is expected outside the classroom may also differ widely. Students from many parts of the world are used to a much more prescriptive attitude to reading, and with that, highly specific guidance, concentration on key texts, and testing—either oral or written—on their reading. Faced with a booklist six pages long, a general encouragement to read and reflect widely, and a high value placed on diversity of reading among the class, many international students are highly disorientated. What may be presented as a mature, self-directed, postgraduate level *modus operandi* is experienced as unfocused, superficial, and downright confusing. Some international students interviewed noted what they regarded as superficial levels of learning and ability to analyse texts in the UK students.

This general background of expectations is important because familiarity with teaching and learning styles employed on the course will enable confidence in critical thinking. (Or, at the very least, unfamiliarity and disorientation will *disable* such confidence.) Beyond the general, however, specific attention must be paid in induction to the nature of what is expected and indeed rewarded in the course. The issue of

*independent thinking* featured strongly in student responses, both in the focus group and in the questionnaires. The general view of this was positive; encouragement to think independently was described as being ‘allowed to fly’ (Hungary), being ‘free’ (Israel), ‘broadening my imagination’ (Russia). What was, however, also clear was that such freedom could be unnerving and, most importantly, thinking independently, and expressing that thought in an appropriate academic way, was a skill which needed to be taught, thoroughly and in an ongoing way throughout the course. Again, this is an issue for induction, but also for continuous attention.

A further issue of expectations emerged in the specifically religious context of our MAs. The kind of critical and independent thinking encouraged by us and indeed demanded by M level descriptors nationally in the UK, posed specific problems to students on both courses who had come from academic backgrounds in religious seminaries where boundaries are set on such thinking. For example, students from both Orthodox and Reformed Christian seminaries in Europe had been used to setting ‘creeds of faith’ outside the boundaries of critical discussion even in a fully academic context. To include them was variously experienced as inappropriate or liberating. By contrast, a student from Israel, brought with her a strong ethos of the academy as secular—‘for us all holy cows have been slaughtered already’.

This discussion of religious and political context and its effect on academic process and values assumes a high profile in some students’ experience. There is a clear issue here for induction; teachers need to understand the perspectives with which international students are coming, and the religious and political locations from which they come. Students need to understand what are the religious and political values which underlie the academic process and expectations in the UK.

There are also bigger issues here, which go beyond induction. Listening to the views of others, coming to terms, with what is negotiable and what is not in our faith commitments, understanding the religious and political factors which shape human existence, are matters of life and death in our contemporary world. The presence of so many international students on MA courses with a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds—religious, social, political—offers an important opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding, especially in Religious Studies and Theology. We will miss this opportunity if we so concentrate on instilling a predetermined view of critical thinking that we do not open ourselves to the understanding of other approaches.

For example, we may be led to question the normative UK approach which rewards an objectively critical methodology and allows any appropriately critically argued conclusion to stand in an assignment, in other words espouses liberal values in method but does not impose them in conclusions. Markham controversially argues:

We need to return to an older view of education. Education is training in a tradition: it involves the cultivation of certain virtues within a world view. Liberalism is a tradition, even though it has not always appreciated that this is the case ...<sup>15</sup>

While this is an argument for 'liberal' values, some of our international students would identify with such a view of education from the perspective of other traditions.

We may also be led to question our sometimes exclusive emphasis on criticality as the means to 'true' understanding. The priority given to critical reflection often squeezes out other ways of knowing, for example the contemplative, the performative, the imaginative and the participatory. A student from central Europe on the Pastoral Theology MA wrote a dissertation on a prominent religious figure in her own tradition, which was at first heavily criticised as 'hagiographic' and 'uncritical' by tutors. The student proceeded to write an excellent defence, based on current writings in Pastoral Theology concerning symbol, imagination, and participation in holiness, justifying her method.<sup>16</sup>

Induction of international students should pay attention to issues of *language and communication*, which goes beyond the provision of separate language classes to integration within the context of the course, its seminars, its assignments and its informal aspects. Most institutions require international applicants to demonstrate language proficiency, but these tests do not cover the specialist vocabularies of Religious Studies

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<sup>15</sup> I. Markham, 'The Meaning and the Ends of Teaching Religion', *Teaching Theology and Religion* Vol. 1, No. 3 (1998), p.137. Markam's case studies are Holocaust denial, the problem of patriarchy, and accounts and models of divine providence.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of other epistemologies and ways of doing Theology see J.Henderson, 'What's Wrong with Pastoral Theology?', *British Journal of Theological Education* 13.2, forthcoming; Robert K. Martin, 'Theological Education in Epistemological Perspective: the Significance of Michael Polanyi's "Personal Knowledge" for a Theological Orientation of Theological Education', *Teaching in Theology and Religion* Vol.1, No.3 (1998) pp. 139-153; A. L. Tomlinson *God's Spies*, Contact Pastoral Monograph No. 11(2001).



and Theology. Moreover, studies suggest that language proficiency tests are poor indicators of a student's ability to understand metaphor. In fact, English proficiency may be detrimental to student comprehension of reading matter or oral discussions where *metaphor* is frequently deployed (as it is in much Religion and Theology discourse). Those with a good command of English (and with high IELTS scores) may be more satisfied with, and confident about, their own (*mis-*) understandings of a debate, and so less likely to seek clarification from a tutor or fellow students.<sup>17</sup> For these reasons, some kind of pre-course reading or training may be advisable. This is particularly the case where students may have learned International, or American English, rather than British English.

Language raises acute issues in a seminar-based course. The international students in our group raised the following questions: "Do my fellow students understand what I say?" "People from the UK are more 'comfortable' in seminars. They can waffle; it's more difficult to sustain fifteen minutes for those who just have to go straight to the point." These are issues about being socially at ease; they are also issues about academic participation and about parity of assessment.

Language may also raise some specific issues for those doing assignments which involve empirical research. Misunderstanding about the meaning of key terms is more likely to occur where culturally conditioned understanding varies. For example, the use of the word 'ecumenical' in a cross-cultural context caused a substantial misunderstanding for one student doing an empirical research project.<sup>18</sup> In questionnaire and interview work it is not only a question of teacher/student understanding as in other assignments, but a much wider community is involved. Misunderstanding can lead to wasted time and to lack of conceptual clarity.

That critical thinking is directly affected by language issues was clearly identified in our tutors' group. One tutor pointed out the 'sheer difficulty of doing academic study in a language which is not your own': first the level of critical subtlety you can obtain is lower, and then, second, 'you have to say it!' Evaluating argument is a key element of

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<sup>17</sup> For example, J. Littlemore, 'The Use of Metaphor in University Lectures and the Problems that it Causes for Overseas Students,' *Teaching in Higher Education* Vol. 6, No. 3 (2001), pp. 333-349.

<sup>18</sup> The perspective was derived from a context of Orthodox involvement with the World Council of Churches and was strongly theological; the research subject's angle came from a local, pragmatic British perspective.

critical thinking. ‘Critical thinking comes in many forms, but all possess a single core feature. They presume that human arguments require evaluation if they are to be worthy of widespread respect.’<sup>19</sup> Actually spotting argument and counter argument in discourse is much more difficult in a language not your own. Cultural factors may also inhibit identification of argument; argument discourse is more or less ‘blatant’ in different cultures. This relates directly to the issue of ‘English politeness’ identified above.

Induction of international students should be regarded as an *ongoing task* which is not completed in the first few days or weeks of the academic programme. Induction at the *beginning* of a course is absolutely vital, and needs to cover a range of aspects of study. What has become clear in the course of our research is that ‘induction’, at least for international students, is a process which needs to go on throughout a course of study. What has also become clear is that there is induction of *teaching staff* which is just as important as induction of international students, indeed it is a prerequisite for the latter to happen properly. In all of the areas we have identified—context, social relationships, academic expectations, language and communication—induction cannot be seen as a task completed in the first week or two of the programme, nor can it be seen in an isolated way as ‘induction of international students’ apart from issues for the whole community of learning.

### 3.2.2. Teaching and Learning

The definitions of critical thinking referred to earlier in this article bring out to varying degrees the following elements—the *techniques* of reasoning and of evaluating the reasoning of others, the *creativity* to go beyond this to make good reflective judgements, and *empowerment* to act constructively in the enquiry after truth. Our discussion of induction has quite deliberately included factors which relate to techniques, creativity and empowerment. This is also true of this section, on teaching and learning.

For international students, teaching and learning is the area in which critical thinking is both lost and found. In the questionnaire students were invited to reflect on the differences, if any, they experienced between the understanding of critical thinking in their home country and in the UK. They were then invited to expand on this by

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<sup>19</sup> M.Neil Browne and Kari Freeman, ‘Distinguishing Features of Critical Thinking Classrooms’, *Teaching in Higher Education* Vol. 5, No. 3 (2000) p. 302.

reflecting on the differences in the use of analytic and synthetic skills in their home country and in the UK. A key factor which emerged, was the contrast between a textual analytical definition of critical thinking, and a more reflective, independent and creative definition which was experienced in the UK context. This is summed up well in the following contribution from a Canadian student:

Critical thinking means learning to *read material* 'critically' ... This means *analysing* what is being said, whether *the author* has developed the material logically and coherently ... Critical thinking also considers what other information is relevant that could either strengthen or weaken the *author's argument*.

This is an analytical and text-oriented approach, without explicit attention to the creative or empowering constructive dimensions possible within critical thinking. A student from New Zealand, who observed that UK and NZ expectations of critical thinking were very similar, significantly added to the textual/analytical elements of his definition the words, 'and say where one *personally comes out*, and be prepared to defend that position'.

It is in the areas of independence and creativity that international students would appear to have to make the greatest transitions in their view of critical thinking when studying at Masters level in the UK. Although within Religious Studies and Theology there are specific issues about the dissection and analysis of authoritative religious texts for some international students (as there are indeed for some UK students), we find that high levels of textual/analytical skills may sit alongside much lower levels of synthetic and creative skills. One tutor identified the tendency in international students on his module to describe an argument, even to analyse it critically, but then to *juxtapose* their own view alongside rather than to *engage* the two elements.

However, the wider, more creative, emphasis in operation in our UK context was seen by some international students as having a negative side.

*Much less knowledge* is required on which you have to base your ideas but it is more expected to think for yourself and reflect on your experiences than in Germany. (Our italics)

This sentiment was echoed by a Russian student in the focus group, who pointed out that UK students can often fail to 'engage with the whole theological tradition ... they take something from science, and a bit of

their experience and call it theology'. This criticism of the lack of foundational knowledge in UK students needs to be taken seriously. The problem may be exacerbated in taught MA courses when applicants are admitted from a variety of previous academic disciplines, and are then further expected to engaged with not one but a multiplicity of new disciplines. It may also be connected with a complicated relationship between the encouragement of adult autonomy in learning, the respecting of professional expertise brought to 'vocational' MAs, and the difficulties of finding time for sustained study experienced by part-time students. Its connection in the minds of the international students we spoke to with a requirement to 'give your own view' as a component of critical thinking may, however, be a crucial factor.

So there is both losing and finding here, for international students, and potentially also for UK students. It would be quite inappropriate to work on the assumption that critical thinking is absent simply because it does not manifest itself in the ways expected in the UK system. What is needed is a mutual understanding between teachers and learners of differences in the understanding of critical thinking and of what are the particular obstacles which international students encounter in attempting to learn what is required by critical thinking in the UK. To explore this further we shall examine four areas of the teaching and learning experience of international students—new content, new methods, relationships with tutors and relationships with peers.

## **New content**

This is in part a straightforward issue concerning the study of topics which are in themselves completely new. It is, of course, impossible to generalise about 'international students here'; what is new depends on context. However, studying certain subjects within the discipline of Religious Studies and Theology is likely to be a totally new experience to many international students. Within our Pastoral Theology course two of these are social/cognitive psychology and feminist theology. The conceptual frameworks, the discourse and the implicit values of these disciplines are often unfamiliar and may be culturally threatening. This must be recognised and acknowledged. In a similar way a topic may be initially familiar, for example counselling, but its treatment and underpinning assumptions may be utterly different in a UK context from other contexts. The counselling example has surfaced, with different nuances, in the Pastoral Theology course in relation both to students from Africa and to students from the USA.

There is a particular issue about new content, which was expressed in the tutors' focus group as 'canon versus context'. What is the appropriate balance between the 'canon of the module'—the texts and subject matter which are specified for the module—and reflection on the context from which students come? There is a perceived need to integrate a foreign context into a local setting. On the one hand, students rightly expect that what they learn in their UK course should be useful in and appropriately integrated into their home context. As adult learners they should be invited also to draw on their experiences, which will primarily be experiences of their home context. On the other hand, the texts and the material content of our MA modules are normally primarily UK oriented, or at least Western oriented. Their canon arises within a context. This problem may be particularly acute in a degree programme, which is designed to invite students to reflect on their practice, such as our Pastoral Theology course, but we find it appears also in the Jewish-Christian Relations course. One manifestation is that, for example, 'Polish students tend to look only at Polish literature; Russian students only read Russian Orthodox material'.<sup>20</sup>

As we encourage international students to engage in all three elements of the critical thinking task—the textual/analytical, the independent creative, and the purposively constructive—we must be aware of the difficulties of doing this where subject matter is alien and new—conceptually and in terms of implicit values. We should explore the 'canon versus context' problem in such a way as to maximise what the students can draw on from their own experience, to maximise the usefulness of their study for the future, but supportively to invite realistic engagement with what is new and strange to them.

## New methods

As well as new content, international students may have to negotiate new methods of study. We have identified four aspects of masters level study which can cause problems. One is the prevalence of independent study. A high proportion of the study time for each module is designated 'student managed learning' (in our case, the standard for APU Arts and Humanities taught Masters programmes is 276 hours out of 300, with 24 hours class time.) Then we have an optional Independent Learning

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<sup>20</sup> One of the authors of this paper has a vivid memory of a Bulgarian student wanting to write a paper on prostitution in Bulgaria and presenting her with the results of a literature search of books in Russian and Bulgarian, with the request to advise on which would be the best books to read!

Module generic to the programmes, as well as the Dissertation. The ability to study independently is valued and rewarded in our assessment criteria. We have already discussed the difficulties of social isolation and academic disorientation which this may cause. Many international students are used to higher levels of class time, more continuous monitoring of learning and more controlled reading programmes. Independent study may involve less access to the tutor and to peers than would best suit international students.

A second aspect is the extensive use of seminars in taught Masters programmes. Active learning is a key element in the development of critical thinking, as is a certain ‘developmental tension’ in classrooms which promote critical thinking. Browne and Freeman point out that this may not be easy to handle:

Suggesting that the tension associated with controversy in the classroom is an effective strategy for developing critical thinking skills raises a serious concern for many teachers. Will controversy prove so potent a fuel that some learners will choke on its fumes? In short, can tension become antagonistic to learning? ... [A]ll ... paternalistic protection of learners from robust conversation fails to explain how students will ever grow to be participants in that conversation, unless they are encouraged to practice a critical engagement with serious discourse.<sup>21</sup>

This proved to be a key issue in our student focus group, about which the group spoke animatedly. High levels of anxiety were associated by most of the students with seminars. Reasons they identified were language, vocabulary, lack of freedom to speak out, a sense that they were listened to politely but not really engaged with, and the consequent lack of feedback. Frustration was expressed about the English (British?) inability to ask a question: ‘Some English people have a problem in that they can’t ask a question—it turns into a speech. People just listen politely in England when this happens!’.

Interdisciplinarity is an increasingly common feature of taught Masters programmes in the UK and may in itself contribute to the higher levels of critical thinking where ‘critique opens the possibility of entirely different and even contrasting modes of understanding’.<sup>22</sup> As Barnett says, ‘Interdisciplinarity is necessarily *critical interdisciplinarity*’.<sup>23</sup> This puts added burdens onto international students as they not only

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<sup>21</sup> Browne and Freeman, *Distinguishing Features*, p.306.

<sup>22</sup> Barnett, *Higher Education*, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.19.

have to learn a new conceptual discipline, its norms and its discourse, but they have to learn more than one, perhaps several. For example, UK students taking the module 'Jews and Christians, literature and film' have to become familiar with the teaching of literary and film studies as well as Theology and Religious Studies. International students may have added to this burden the need to learn new ways of 'doing' Theology and Religious Studies. In the UK, the concepts of teaching and learning Theology may be entirely different from many other countries, such as Germany. Dr. Hannah Holtschneider, Affiliated Lecturer at CJCR suggests that,

[...] 'theology' is an example of a word with different meanings in the UK and in Germany. Most Theology Departments in the UK would not qualify as such. The study of a tradition within the boundaries of the tradition (always denominationally separate), that would be part of a definition of 'theology' in a German context, which then breaks down into the five disciplines necessary to conduct such a study (Old Testament and New Testament exegesis, church history, systematic theology, practical theology— Catholics divide slightly differently). Hence the understanding of 'discipline' would be different, interdisciplinarity again taking on a different meaning. When reading authoritative texts, what is encouraged is voicing one's own approach in the context of a tradition—and it is teacher specific. Teachers associate openly with a particular tradition and generally lecture on their research, which means that students choose to attend lectures of the people they want to learn from. Critical thinking here means learning someone's position closely and then either accepting it as one's own line ('my teacher X', in which case plagiarism in the UK sense is almost unavoidable) or distancing oneself (in which case the student would rarely choose to write an assessed essay for that particular lecture/seminar).

There are different types of interdisciplinarity. Thompson Klein<sup>24</sup> suggests three:

- bridge building: between disciplines that are perceived to be complete and firm entities—in effect an additive strategy—we 'add' something from another discipline to our 'home' discipline;
- restructuring: more radical, where the disciplines and the structure of knowledge itself are critiqued;

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<sup>24</sup> J. Thompson Klein, *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1996.

- transdisciplinarity: where integration of different knowledge, processes, takes place around an overarching paradigm/concept/theory.

For any student, all the types of activities described above are challenging ones; they are even more challenging if a student is starting from a context where their ‘home’ discipline, and even the notion of disciplinarity itself, is differently defined, as is the case for many international students. Furthermore, performing these types of interdisciplinary activities entails a marked shift away from practising a clearly identifiable ‘method’, and becomes increasingly dependent on the ability to undertake processes linked with critical thinking (i.e. one needs to be good at posing problems, solving problems, integrating knowledge and approaches, and also to be self-reflexive). Interdisciplinarity requires us to step back from our own disciplines and think about how they characteristically look at the world.

Finally, research methods, including specifically empirical research methods, are again increasingly valued in taught Masters programmes. While one tutor refers to the ‘sheer fright of empirical research’, she also states that international students ‘appreciate the applied nature of the work as it enables them to make practical links with their own cultures. It seems they find this task ultimately very useful for their home situation.’ There are, however, pitfalls here. We have already mentioned the communication issues which may affect international students doing empirical research. There are other cultural issues—for example one student was surprised that people took so long to reply to his questionnaires; he had expected friendship and politeness to be expressed in a quick return, and the resultant delay caused him to have to give in his work late. A further problem centres specifically around students wanting to research issues from their home context for their Dissertation. They find themselves in the dilemma of balancing the merits of staying in the UK to get the books and the first hand supervision, versus returning to their home context where the empirical research can more easily be done but the other resources and support are absent.

## Relationships with tutors

We would like to make two rather diverse points under this heading. The first concerns the shift in the kind of relationship between tutor/teacher/professor and student, which many international students



find themselves having to make. This difficulty cuts to the heart of even social relationships, as is well illustrated by Soueif's fictional Asya again:

'Ah! – you mustn't call me Professor, you know' He gives her a quick, shy smile. 'You can call me Bill.'  
'Oh! Right. Thank you.'  
Of course, she can't possibly call him 'Bill'. But now she can't call him anything else either.<sup>25</sup>

It is not only the question of social relationship, or even just of regarding the teacher and her work as an authority to be respected, it is a question also of defining one's own work in relationship to the teaching and the work of the 'professor'. This is connected with the tendency amongst many international students to regard the work of certain teachers as authoritative texts. It is part of the academic task to analyse these but to analyse and understand them *as authoritative texts*. This approach makes it difficult for the student to feel they can legitimately voice their own views, and so to reach the higher creative and constructive levels of what is regarded as critical thinking in the UK.

Our second point about tutors is a more positive one. Our study indicated that a good mentoring relationship between tutor (or tutors) and student is a vital component for the success and well being of international students. A student from New Zealand commented twice on the value of the one-on-one help he was given, and another from Germany expressed how much she would have benefited had more been offered, or had she had the courage to ask. A tutor commented,

The confidence to risk (which comes from the relationship between teacher and student) enables them to do their best. I make it clear that I am on their side: that they can ask me any questions ... The paramount issue in my experience is giving the international students confidence within a mentoring relationship, and making it very clear what I'm looking for.

## Relationships with peers

This aspect of the development of critical thinking in the teaching and learning of international students has been implicit in our foregoing discussions, both of the definition of critical thinking and of the role of seminars. There are issues about comparability which is a vital issue in

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<sup>25</sup> Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun* p. 330.

assessment. How do we assess the rather different, but often equally robust, definitions of critical thinking which international students bring? And how do we bring these profitably into dialogue with the different skills and understandings of UK students? Too often no such dialogue is facilitated. How do we deal with the issues, which international students have raised about their sense of being disadvantaged in a seminar context? The development of critical thinking in international students in taught MA contexts cannot be isolated from the learning development of the whole seminar group.

### **3.2.3. Assessment**

Interest in critical thinking is in part driven by the exigencies of assessment. As we have noted at the outset, critical thinking and its components yield key elements in both the generic and the specific learning outcomes required of Masters level study in the UK. Because of this we paid specific attention to assessment in our research.

#### **Previous experience**

We noticed significant disparity in previous experience of assessment. We identified that a student from Russia arrived expecting free length essays and lots of them; a student from Israel arrived expecting sometimes to write just one page even at postgraduate level, but then also to write seminars up to twenty pages like a dissertation; a student from Hungary arrived expecting only oral testing; while the UK students have normally worked through undergraduate assignments which prepare them for what is expected the next level up in the UK system. Such variety makes the task of enabling students to interpret what is required of them in this particular context all the more difficult for tutors. The first step is to know and understand the point from which individual students start.

#### **Academic conventions and requirements**

A second important issue is to make absolutely clear the conventions and requirements of assessment. We have found that misunderstandings occur particularly in respect of plagiarism, interpretation of essay titles, word lengths, and differing notions of what the term ‘critical argument’ means.

In a UK context plagiarism, ‘the deliberate and substantial unacknowledged incorporation in a student’s work of material derived

from the work (published or unpublished) of another<sup>26</sup>, is not only not rewarded academically, it is an offence which normally carries penalties. While at one level this convention is clear and straightforward in application, for some international students it cuts across an ethos of respect, even veneration, for authoritative texts and authors. To use the work of another person is to accord them honour. To concentrate on the exposition of authoritative texts, putting other people's words in a central position in one's own work, is the heart of academic study. 'Plagiarism' is closely akin to a spirit of hagiographic treatment of respected authors and texts. This approach is not highly valued in a UK academic context; it is so valued in other contexts.

The interpretation of essay titles may be another pitfall for international students. For example, we have observed several cases of students from the USA who regard it as entirely academically legitimate to use an essay title as a starting point for a free-ranging discussion or to fashion their own essay title using a few key words from the one set by the tutor. The high value placed on 'answering the question' in a UK context is alien to them. There is particular problem here for critical thinking. External Examiners and other teachers frequently encourage the use of critically framed questions precisely to ensure that the student engages critically, analytically and evaluatively in the subject matter. The question itself is an instrument of developing a critical approach as opposed to a merely descriptive one. This clearly does not work if students do not attend precisely to the wording and intent of essay titles.

Word lengths have proved a difficulty. This partly arises because of very different expectations in previous educational contexts (see above) but also because many students whose native language is not English find it more difficult to say what they need to in the prescribed word length. This is an example of the deeper issues concerning language. It may be asked (and has been in our institution) whether such students are truly on a level playing field with native English speakers in respect of the actual assessment criteria if they are kept to the same word lengths.

Finally, assessment is the key area where differing views of what critical thinking and critical argument are come to the fore. In the exercise we gave the student focus group, there was a strong emphasis on the use and evaluation of sources, evidence and the correctness of factual detail. This indicates a high value given to some of the key tools and techniques, which are a *sine qua non* of critical thinking. Less in

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<sup>26</sup> *The Taught Postgraduate Handbook 2000-1*, APU, p. 107.

evidence were the ‘higher’ levels of critical thinking—the creative and constructive levels. The tutors bore this analysis out, suggesting that the ‘why?’ questions were often missing in the critical approach of many international students.

## Marking and tutors’ feedback

Of immediate interest to our students’ group was the question of whether particular allowances are made for them as international students. The straightforward answer to this is ‘no’. We have seen in the case of word lengths that such a blanket approach does not actually make for a level playing field. However, to make a just and equitable system of allowances would be hideously complicated.

The emphasis in our context at APU is that study skills and other support should be given in the learning process rather than allowances made at the assessment point. A student from Germany pointed out how important feedback is in relation to the development of skills:

Unfortunately the comments did not help but only stressed the difficulties I already have seen myself with adjusting to the new system.

This suggests that feedback should not only indicate issues that need attention, but should actually offer the student ways of moving forward on those issues. Such feedback can take account of the particular context of the international student, even if the mark awarded does not. This, of course, becomes much more difficult in a context of anonymous assessment. It is worth noting that taught postgraduate students at APU, including those on Pastoral Theology and Jewish-Christian Relations, are substantially against anonymous marking. The known advantages are not thought to outweigh the advantages on the other side of personalised feedback and support in relation to assignments.

Although our research subjects did not raise this issue, it is also the case that assessment itself may be more or less an instrument of encouraging critical thinking. We have already mentioned the case of essay titles. McMahon, in making a case for the role of *self* assessment in the development of critical thinking, stresses the importance of developing the students’ personal autonomy and asserts that ‘the current prevailing autocratic approach to assessment would seem to be dysfunctional to this essential goal.’<sup>27</sup> Assessment is an integral part of

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<sup>27</sup> Tim McMahon, ‘Using Negotiation in Summative Assessment to Encourage Critical Thinking’, *Teaching in Higher Education* Vol.4, No.4 (1999).

teaching and learning,<sup>28</sup> and it may be that learning outcomes rigidly adhered to and heavily larded with the words ‘evaluate’, ‘analyse’, and ‘assess critically’ may conspire *against* the deeper levels of critical thought.

## 4. Conclusion

Our research project on critical thinking began with an almost exclusive focus on learners, and with a largely skills-based approach to the critical thinking ‘problems’ facing international students on taught postgraduate programmes in the UK. However, during the course of research, our understanding of the issues was modified significantly. It has become clear that the key to addressing international learners’ difficulties with critical thinking does not lie exclusively with student-focused activities (e.g. study skills training). Our findings have significant implications for staff development and support. The teaching and learning aspect of the project shows a need for more extensive *staff development*. As we have identified international student needs and understanding, we have moved from a perspective of ‘how might we provide materials to develop critical thinking in international students’ to ‘how might we foster understanding of what international students need and bring among our learning and teaching community’.

International learners’ experiences should also be understood not merely within the narrow confines of a UK classroom, but in a wider context of relations between partner institutions at the international level. This particularly concerns academic assessment and its interpretation, and the application of UK-acquired education in the home country.

Our findings also raise questions about the definition and place given to critical thinking in the UK higher education system. Definitions of critical thinking are linked to cultural and political assumptions and values. To return to the OCR’s syllabus for its Advanced Subsidiary examination in Critical Thinking, this document explicitly links the teaching of critical thinking to ‘strong commitments’ in ‘our society’ to the principles of ‘(a) non violent resolution of conflict ... , (b) toleration—based essentially on J.S. Mill’s arguments in “On Liberty” about reasonable belief and behaviour, (c) democracy’. Striking political references are also to the fore in Barnett’s study, which links critical

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<sup>28</sup> For further discussion of this see Zoë Bennett Moore, ‘Creative Risk-Taking: Feminist Pedagogy and Assessment Criteria’, *Gender, Teaching and Research in Higher Education: Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2002, pp. 155-166.

being to social radicalism. It uses as its frontispiece a photo of the 1989 stand-off between a lone protestor and the tanks in Tianamen Square. But how do these assumptions behind and justifications of critical thinking fit with the multiculturalism that imbues much UK teaching in Religious Studies and Theology? If UK models of critical thinking are grounded in assumptions about the universal characteristics of ‘our society’, is it fitting to ask international learners to adopt them? If critical thinking concepts are drawn from a largely secularist intellectual tradition, do they offer the most appropriate modes of thinking for students engaged in theological reflection?

Our research shows a need for a more active exchange of academic methods and intellectual traditions and its application to the national educational systems as parts of the international network. It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that the British educational system is widely respected worldwide. Yet UK universities and other academic institutions would benefit from further self-examination by assuming an international perspective on such issues as critical thinking. This would enhance the role that our educational system continues to play in the international academic and intellectual community.

Project Report:  
**Taking Philosophical Dialogue Online**

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**Annamaria Carusi**

*Department of Continuing Education  
Oxford University*

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## Introduction

Online learning technologies did not emerge organically from within educational contexts and we may feel something akin to xenophobic suspicion towards them. But then neither did paper and pen, or any of the other technologies that have since come to be assimilated into educational environments so wholly that they are now experienced as entirely natural; there should be little doubt that online technologies will follow suit. It should be recalled that Plato was suspicious of writing, but that he could only express that suspicion in a literate culture. However, at the moment, using on-line learning technologies does not come naturally and requires effort. Opinion may be split on whether the effort is worthwhile, but at the very least, this has forced some reflection on teaching practices.

The aim of this project is to explore whether the new technologies are useful for teaching philosophy. However, I have not rehearsed the entire panoply of possibilities ranging from noticeboards, to multimedia with all the bells and whistles, though no doubt there are many other useful and interesting purposes to which the technology may be put. Neither have I discussed the technical aspects of online environments, but have taken for granted a knowledge of the basic functioning of the facilities and tools that are incorporated into most Virtual Learning Environments that have been or are being introduced in UK universities. I have instead been more concerned to show how these can be put to use once the technical know-how is dealt with. In this study I have focused on two uses of online technologies: student-led discussion and document-centred discussion. These seem to me to draw upon a cluster of the most potentially exciting features of the technology for teaching of any type, and particularly for the teaching of an eminently discursive discipline such as philosophy. The features in question are (1)

collaboration, (2) interactivity and (3) the oral-written discursive medium of computer-mediated discussions. Before discussing these features at greater length, I begin with a discussion of the pedagogy that informs online learning in a general way, in order later to draw out those factors which appear to be central for the teaching of philosophy in particular. This theoretical section thus focuses on putting forward some of the reasons why it may make good sense to avail ourselves of these technologies as teachers of philosophy; it is followed by a more practical section in which the practicalities of using the technologies are outlined.

## 1. The pedagogy that informs online learning

In this section, I consider three aspects of educational theory that are of particular relevance to online learning and teaching: constructivist educational theory; the development of higher-level cognitive abilities; and the representational and mediated character of academic knowledge.

### 1.1 Constructivism

The term that seems to recur most often in the literature on online learning technologies seems to be ‘constructivism’. In fact, it would often appear that the fact that online learning technologies lend themselves to constructivist educational principles is sufficient to make them desirable. Indeed the World Wide Web and the knowledge economy in which it thrives seem to be particularly amenable to a constructivist epistemology, and the rise of this particular catch-word both in educational theories and in analyses of emerging working practices may be symptomatic of the wider social and cultural environment. A constructivist epistemology is based on the view that objects of knowledge are generated, produced or created as constructs of processes of knowledge (ranging from cognitive processes, to discursive, social and institutional practices) rather than being antecedently existing objects that are grasped or discovered through learning. In particular, it sees knowledge as emerging from the ‘meaning-making’ nature of human beings, and as being a matter of human beings’ attempts to make meaning or interpret their experiences. This activity of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences is communal or collaborationist in many significant respects, and thus there will sometimes be talk of knowledge as negotiated by communities. The tentative, unstable and provisional nature of knowledge is stressed. Constructivism is often closer to a social epistemology than to traditional epistemology, and indeed is generally contrasted with the empiricist-rationalist epistemological tradition. As



philosophers, we may or may not be persuaded by a constructivist epistemology, but it is important to distinguish between this as a philosophical theory and as an educational theory, even though there is a great deal of overlap in their terminology and general outlook. Whereas some constructivists see the learning process they describe as constitutive of knowledge, it is quite possible to take on board the description of the learning process without making any further epistemological commitments.

Constructivism in educational theory is contrasted to *behaviourist-empiricist* models of learning, or, models which are *objectivist* or *proceduralist*. These latter are models in which knowledge is seen as external to learners, and learners as passive absorbers thereof. Teaching is teacher-centred, and tends to be uni-directional, flowing from the teacher to the learner, and paying scant attention to individual learning styles. Obviously this is not a teaching model which finds much favour in current educational theory, and even those who are unversed in educational theory generally know enough at least to try to avoid it. Constructivism has emerged as the prime opponent to this view, although it is by now far from being a marginal competitor, having now taken over as the hegemonic view. Initially developed from the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, statements and definitions of constructivism vary, but all are based on the idea that knowledge is not external to learners, and is not passively absorbed by learners. The following two tenets convey the most important constructivist principles:

- (1) learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge, and
- (2) instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge. (Duffy & Cunningham, quoted in Laurillard 2002:67)

The term ‘constructivist’ may suggest that knowledge is conceived as being internal to the learning process to the extent that there is no external standard for it. Even though the rhetoric sometimes masks this, this need not be the case. Burge, for example, includes in her list of the roles of the constructivist teacher those of ‘confirm[ing] the learning identified by learners, and guid[ing] learners to generate correct solutions’ (1995:156). The key-word is *active*, a process of learning by doing, which is, it seems to me, particularly appropriate for philosophy.

The following is a summary of the principles of constructivist teaching which I have quoted at length, since it puts forward several sound principals for the teaching of philosophy:

- Learning is not the result of development; learning *is* development. It requires invention and self-organization on the part of the learner. Thus teachers need to allow learners to raise their own questions, generate their own hypotheses and models as possibilities, and test them for viability.
- Disequilibrium facilitates learning. “Errors” need to be perceived as a result of learners’ conceptions and therefore not minimized or avoided. Challenging, open-ended investigations in realistic meaningful contexts need to be offered, thus allowing learners to explore and generate many possibilities, both affirming and contradictory. Contradictions, in particular, need to be illuminated, explored, and discussed.
- Reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning. As meaning-makers, humans seek to organize and generalize across experiences in a representational form. Allowing reflection time through journal writing, representation in multisymbolic form, and/or discussion of connections across experiences or strategies may facilitate reflective abstraction.
- Dialogue within a community engenders further thinking. The classroom needs to be seen as a “community of discourse engaged in activity, reflection and conversation” (Fosnot, 1989). The learners (rather than the teacher) are responsible for defending, proving, justifying, and communicating their ideas to the classroom community. Ideas are accepted as truth only insofar as they make sense to the community and thus rise to the level of “taken-as-shared”.
- Learning proceeds toward the development of structures. As learners struggle to make meaning, progressive structural shifts in perspective are constructed—in a sense “big ideas” (Schifter & Fosnot, 1993). These “big ideas” are learner-constructed, central organizing principles that can be generalized across experiences and that often require the undoing or reorganizing of earlier conceptions. This process continues throughout development. (Fosnot 1996: 29-30)

Three points need to be highlighted: the first is the fact that one of the central processes of knowledge construction is that of describing and

interpreting experience; in fact, even more central to this is a view of learning as being a process of appropriating and manipulating representational systems (a point to which I return in the next section). Hence an important role of the teacher is to facilitate descriptions and re-descriptions of the learning material. The second is the fact that the constructivist approach is also a collaborativist one. The fact that the constructivist approach to teaching is learner-centred rather than teacher-centred means that the teacher is a facilitator rather than an authority on the subject matter. Of course, the teacher is an authority, or at least this is to be hoped, but the focus of teaching is shifted from getting the students to align their knowledge with that of the teacher and rather to come to come to know 'by his or her own light' (and so to internalise the ideals of the Enlightenment!). The constructivist paradigm that has emerged—in particular with the more socially oriented constructivism of Vygotsky—sees this as being greatly enhanced by collaborating with peers, in dialogues and discussions, rather than as being induced by the lone individual reflecting upon his or her own thoughts. By having to carve out and formulate a position of their own among those of others—none of whom is an authority—students are encouraged 'to be responsible for the concepts they construct, the beliefs they hold, and the arguments they formulate and defend' (Bach & Manion 2001:48). The third is the fact that this collaboration has—and indeed thrives on—an inherent disequilibrium: trial, error and opposition, something which is inherent to the processes which go to building up and testing philosophical arguments.

The centrality of collaboration to the constructivist paradigm generally and active learning in particular is stressed by several researchers.<sup>1</sup> There is a collaborative learning situation if peers are (i) more-or-less at the same level and can perform the same actions; (ii) have a common goal, and (iii) work together in such a way as to trigger learning mechanisms (Dillenbourg 1999). On one view of collaboration, it is beneficial simply because it encourages active participation: instead of a uni-directional teaching process from teacher to student, there are multi-directional interactions between participants, each of whom is responsible for their contribution. This seems to be most in line with the idea of knowledge emerging from learning rather than being imposed on it: 'Knowledge according to this view is something that emerges through active dialogue, by formulating ideas into words and building ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Harasim (1995) and Harasim (2001), Falchikov (2001), Dillenbourg (1999), Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway & Krajcik (1996).

concepts through the reactions and responses of others to these formulations' (Harasim 2001:52). There is, however, no reason to believe that collaboration *per se* triggers learning mechanisms. Collaborations need to be carefully designed and monitored in order to have the desired effects. In particular, the role of conflict in collaboration is interesting.

Collaboration with peers is particularly important in de-centering the teacher as authority. On the Piagetian model of pedagogy, the conflicting perspectives that emerge in collaborations are seen as having a productive role. It is claimed that young children do not test adults' ideas as they do those of their peers (Littleton & Häkkinen 1999:23). Disagreements with other children highlight alternatives to the child's own point of view which can be considered on an equal footing. In addition, if a resolution of conflict of opinion is necessitated, children can be prodded towards higher-level solutions. For example, in a study of the role of conflict in learning, it was found that children playing Mastermind in teams fared better than those playing alone; and pairs who argued more did better than those who argued less. Thus disagreement complemented by the need for justification to one's peers, with a specific goal, seems to be particularly efficacious. On Vygotsky's constructivist model, in which learning is seen as being a fundamentally social developmental process, collaboration is seen as similarly important. Interpersonal processes become the model for intra-personal processes; thus 'discussion, interaction and argument become internalised as the basis for reflection and logical reasoning' (Vygotsky, quoted in Littleton & Häkkinen 1999:24).

Dillenbourg (1999:13) further points out that collaborative interactions are useful for learning in particular where there is space for negotiation. This is inhibited where the subject matter is semantically obvious or unambiguous, and leaves nothing to be disagreed upon. Where there is space for negotiation, participants can argue for their standpoint, justify, and attempt to convince others. In addition, where there is space for negotiation, there is also space for misunderstanding, and when participants misunderstand each other, they have to explain themselves, reformulate statements and so on. These are the kinds of activities that lead to learning, and will be of interest to teachers of philosophy in particular. The fact that structured academic controversies have several beneficial results, both cognitive and social is well-supported; among these benefits are:

- greater quantity and quality of achievement, complex reasoning, and creative problem solving;
- higher-quality decision making;
- healthier cognitive, social and psychological development by being better able to deal with stress and cope with unforeseen adversities;
- increased motivation and energy to take action;
- higher quality relationships with friends, co-workers and family members;
- a greater sense of caring, commitment, joint identity and cohesiveness with an emphasis on increased liking, respect and trust;
- heightened awareness that a problem exists that needs to be solved;
- increased incentive to change. (Falchikov 2001:78)

This impressive array of benefits does not, however, come without effort, and while online resources are particularly geared towards collaboration, online collaborative projects need to be especially well-monitored and well-structured. However, it is, I hope, obvious that the collaborative dimension is extremely important in achieving active learning, and is an essential component of constructivist teaching methodology.

## 1.2 Higher-level cognitive skills

There are, thus, several ways in which constructivist-collaborativist principles develop what we recognise as being the type of philosophical virtues that philosophy teachers try to encourage in their students. In a narrower sense, in effect, what we are looking for are any resources that help to develop higher-level cognitive skills. The TELRI project based at the University of Warwick, identifies the skills that are needed in order to encourage research-based learning and teaching, on the premise that these are the very same skills that differentiate between students who cope and those who excel. Apart from the ability to be innovative, to work independently, to set and solve problems, research requires well-developed higher-order cognitive skills. These include the abilities to:

- make meaning, by interpreting information, forming and applying concepts and principles, critical analysis, synthesis into coherent wholes,
- generate ideas, using innovative thought, creativity,

- take decisions, using procedures, algorithms, strategies, heuristics and judgements about applicability,
- reflect on own purposes and processes, including justifications for judgements and decisions, possibilities of transferability. (TELRI project).

These skills are the basis for *adaptive* rather than *adoptive* learning: that is, generative rather than reproductive learning. Whereas adoptive learning is tied to particular problems and situations, adaptive learning has an in-built transferability to a wide range of problems and situations (though not necessarily across disciplines). For our purposes, a generalised ability to ‘think philosophically’ across a wide range of problems, would be an instance of adaptive learning.

Another way of characterising higher-level cognitive skills is by reference to the so-called SOLO taxonomy, developed by Biggs and Collis<sup>2</sup>, to map out the degrees of increasing structural complexity through which learning occurs. They differentiate between five levels of learning response: prestructural (irrelevant or incorrect); unistructural (one relevant aspect); multistructural (several relevant independent aspects); relational (several relevant and integrated aspects); and extended abstract (high level of abstract thinking, generalisation). It is only from the relational level upwards that higher level cognitive skills come into play. These levels are further distinguished according to how well they are instantiated in learning, that is, with what degree of cognitive complexity.

*Relational (a) & (b)*: The most basic level of relational understanding—‘Relational (a)’—is a ‘compare and contrast’ response. Biggs (1999:48) refers to this as *declarative understanding*, which is the ability to use a concept to integrate a collection of data. ‘Relational (b)’ is a more complex or higher level of relational response and is reflected by the ability to apply a concept to a familiar data set or problem. Biggs (1999) calls this *functional understanding*.

*Extended Abstract (a) & (b)*: Here students’ responses are characterised by a high level of abstract thinking, originality, or generalisation, and going beyond what is given or expected; for example, the ability to theorise, generalise, hypothesise, and reflect (Biggs, 1999:48). The SOLO tag ‘extended abstract (a)’ represents learning responses that demonstrate the ability to relate content to existing principles; whereas the ‘extended

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<sup>2</sup> As set forth in Whittle, Morgan & Maltby (2000).

abstract (b)' SOLO tag represents responses involving questioning and going beyond existing principles. (Whittle, Morgan & Maltby 2000)

The difference between the (a) and (b) levels in both instances seems to reside in the difference between using a concept or principle correctly, and reflecting on the concept or principle used. Philosophical skills are concentrated in the (b) levels of both the relational and extended abstract levels of thinking, as philosophical subject-matter is most often itself a matter of reflecting on available concepts and principles. There is little by way of declarative knowledge that a student can rely on—and even when there is, the way it is expressed says much about the extent to which it is understood.

These higher-level cognitive skills are the very ones that constructivist teaching methodology aims to develop, which makes it particularly apt for the teaching of philosophy. Since it is claimed that online resources are particularly conducive to constructivist principles, it is fairly safe to conclude that they will also be valuable for the teaching of philosophy. The question is whether the benefits of online resources are really worth the trouble they take in setting up and maintaining them, as there are, of course, many different ways of going about teaching in a generally constructivist way.

Online learning resources are particularly suited to constructivist teaching principles, and this is often taken to be in itself an encouragement for using them.<sup>3</sup> They allow for a de-centred, non-authoritarian approach to learning, where the learner explores at his or her own pace in a non-linear and individualistic way. The web is a paradigm of open-endedness and its multimedia possibilities allow for multi-symbolic representations which encourage just the kind of aptitude with representational systems that students need in order to succeed academically. The web is in addition a paradigm of knowledge in a social space; the web, unlike a book, can in principle be infinitely added to, and invites participation. The resources which stand out in particular are those which allow for collaboration, that is those which facilitate dialogue and discussion: email, list-servers, chatrooms and discussion boards. These resources make communication with the tutor, and with fellow-students—and indeed with people outside of one's immediate learning community—far easier, thus providing opportunities for (1) describing and interpreting the learning material, and thereby gaining practice in and assimilating the appropriate discourse; (2) gaining access

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Knowlton (2002), Whittle, Morgan & Maltby (2000).

to different perspectives, either consonant or dissonant with the student's own, and thus bringing about reflection on the student's own perspective as one that must be justified to others (opportunities for disequilibrium); (3) in virtue of its own open-endedness and relative lack of structure, encouraging students to develop their own structures and frameworks in order to make sense of the domain with which they are dealing.

Apart from teaching methodologies, it is also worthwhile exploring some of the more general factors upon which higher-level thinking skills are predicated. The factor I wish to consider here is literacy. It is a little acknowledged fact that these higher-level skills are those which characterise literate cultures, and that they do so in virtue of the type of manipulation of symbolic or representational symbols which literacy allows for; not surprisingly, this is also at the centre of academic competence generally, particularly in higher education, where we do not deal with 'brute' experiences—or here less than anywhere else—but more significantly, with representations.

### 1.3 Representation and discourse

A further methodological principle that teachers are often exhorted to put into practice is that of making learning relevant to learners, by connecting material with their experiences. This seems particularly difficult in philosophy, as even when experiences can be drawn upon, their pedagogical value tends to be relatively quickly exhausted. In addition, philosophy does not lend itself to application in 'live' contexts. Even with our best efforts to render it more concrete, there is no getting round its highly abstract nature. Philosophy is not alone in this, but shares this peculiarity with disciplines such as theoretical physics, mathematics and logic among others; in fact, to a large extent it shares it with academic learning generally, particularly at the level of higher education, which is not primarily about experiences, but about descriptions and representations.<sup>4</sup> In a critique of the conception of academic learning as situated cognition—which stresses the contextual nature of learning, using knowledge in 'authentic activity' (2002:14), and 'the unity between problem, context and solution when the problem is

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<sup>4</sup> I have retained Laurillard's term 'representation' to refer to entire range of symbolic systems in which academic knowledge is expressed and formulated. For our purposes, obviously linguistic representations as the most important. I have sometimes used the term 'discourse' to indicate a communal or social dimension of a representational system.



experienced, rather than given' (2002:15), Diana Laurillard suggests that situated learning, while useful in getting students to generate abstractions from multiple contexts, is not sufficient to bring about academic learning, which requires that students engage, not only with their own experience, but with knowledge derived from others' experience, and formalised in representational systems, which make it generalisable beyond specific contexts, and generally available to others. Academic learning thus has a decontextualised, second-order nature; teachers mediate between experiences relevant to the discipline and descriptions and other formal representations in which the knowledge specific to the discipline is couched. Laurillard writes that: 'Whereas natural environments afford learning of percepts through situated cognition, teaching must create artificial environments that afford the learning of 'precepts', i.e. descriptions of the world' (2002:24). Teaching ought thus to be geared at least as much towards descriptions of experiences as towards experiences, and an important task of the teacher is to try to get students to generate the 'intended way of representing' their experience. Importantly, these academic experiences are always heavily mediated; first by the conceptions that students bring to them in the first place, and second by the representational system of the discipline they are learning. It is necessary to bring about an adequation between these and an important way of doing this is by getting students to articulate or make explicit their conceptions through descriptions and other representations, and to reflect on them, both so that they can be challenged if there are any misconceptions, and also so that they begin to consider the descriptions as descriptions. Only when they're capable of doing this are they starting to be initiated into the discipline; only then can they begin to 'make the moves' that are recognisable as moves in that discipline. The articulation of and reflection upon conceptions—their own and those of others—requires well-developed *representational* skills to start off with; but in addition, 'students need explicit practice in the representation of knowledge of their subject, in language, symbols, graphs, diagrams, and in the manipulation and interpretation of representations' (Laurillard 2002:40). This also means that active learning, or getting students to 'act on the world' is in fact getting them to act on *descriptions of the world* rather than on an unmediated world. In academic contexts, students do not gain direct knowledge of the world, but mediated knowledge; even better, one might say, knowledge indissolubly embedded in the discourse of the subject. 'When students engage with those worlds by interpreting a novel, or identifying a

substance, or critiquing an organisation, they are generating further descriptions, or representations, which do not themselves engage directly with the world, only with the world of the teacher' (2002:55), that is, with a representative of the discursive domain of the subject.

Philosophy is a thoroughly discursive discipline; in philosophy we have, in a sense, nothing but the representational level. Our 'world of experience' is itself always already a matter of conceptions and representations which students bring with them and on which we try to get students to reflect; even our experiments are for the most part thought experiments. In this, philosophy is probably closest to literature and history of art. Students in some disciplines may be able to assume that they are acting directly on the world, even if this is misconceived. But students of philosophy soon learn that this is an assumption they cannot easily make in the case of philosophy; at the very least, it is rendered problematic for them early on in their philosophical education. This is possibly what leads to the oft-repeated puzzled questions such as 'But what difference does it make to anything?'; overcoming the puzzlement is possibly simultaneous with learning to recognise a *philosophical* problem. The 'doing' of philosophy, the action of active learning, all occurs in the domain of discourse. Students' skill at expressing philosophical ideas is paramount, which is why so much of philosophy teaching is geared towards getting students to write and to talk. Online technologies may well simply be tools that allow for *more* expression, *more* writing and 'talking', and their usefulness may lie simply in this fact. I believe, however, that they are a specific form of discourse, practice in which may be beneficial in its own right. It is worth considering, first, what are the different educational affordances of writing and talking, or literacy and orality.

### 1.3.1 Literate thought

So far, we know that higher-level cognitive skills are those which rely upon a greater degree of reflection upon concepts and principles, and so going beyond what is given, to question, tease out implications, make generalisations, embed within structures, and so on. We also know that the ability to do this depends on representational skills; that is, the skills required to grasp and manipulate representational systems in which academic knowledge is couched. In this section, I look at these skills in more detail, in particular, the way in which they are predicated upon literate thought.

Perhaps we do not appreciate sufficiently the extent to which writing changes thought. Predominantly oral cultures—of which there are not many surviving today—thought in ways that it takes a great leap of the imagination for literate minds to conceive of. Oral minds lived in a substantially different world of knowledge to ours, in ways which it would be tangential to this project to enumerate.<sup>5</sup> The kind of changes that occurred with the advent of literacy are such as to have made the array of academic disciplines that we are familiar with possible; including philosophy, despite its oral origins. The most important characteristics of written discourse for our purposes are the following:

- it is syntactical rather than additive, and so allows for greater organisation of the discourse itself;
- it is analytic and linear rather than aggregative and redundant;
- it allows for greater experimentalism and innovation as it need not concern itself with the conservation and transmission of traditional knowledge.
- it is not as close to lived situations as is oral discourse; it is not as empathetic and participatory as oral discourse, and so allows for more objective distance. Writing separates the knower and the known, and so sets up the conditions for objectivity;
- it allows for a greater level of abstraction than oral discourse, in which geometrical figures, abstract categorisation, formally logical reasoning principles, etc. remain more situated and concrete than in written discourse<sup>6</sup>.

To be inducted into written discourse is not simply to have a handy means of registering one's thoughts and spoken utterances; rather literates not only write but also speak literately: 'they organize, to varying degrees, even their oral expression in thought patterns and verbal patterns that they would not know of unless they could write' (Ong 1982:56). Plato's repudiation of the poets was itself dependent on his having a literate mind, one which, for example, allowed for the kind of objective distance in contrast with which the poets' total identification with Achilles or Odysseus, their privileging of 'soul' over reason, could

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<sup>5</sup> For this section I have relied greatly on Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

<sup>6</sup> This is based on studies by A.R. Luria of illiterate people, described in Ong (1982:50-2).

appear degenerate; and his own critique of writing was made possible by the analytical thought concomitant with writing (Ong 1982:79).

Apart from the characteristics listed above, a major feature of literate thought is, as David Olson (1994) points out, that it is about representations (explicit statements, equations, maps, diagrams, etc.), rather than about the world. To say that academic learning (as described above) is dependent on literate thought is an understatement; it is impossible without it. In literate thought a distinction is made between the representation and what it is a representation of, making it possible to consider the representation in its own right. This consideration in turn concerns the way in which the representation ought to be taken: for example, literally or metaphorically, whether it is a factual claim or a relational model, whether it describes a cause or an effect; whether a statement makes a claim or provides evidence for the claim. These different ways of ‘taking’<sup>7</sup> statements are the building blocks of inferences. And lastly, the representation is distinguished from the thoughts of its speaker or writer; in other words, a gap opens up between knowledge and opinion. Each of these points comes down to the fact that literate thought is a ‘conscious representation and deliberate manipulation of thinking activities’ (Olson 1994:280). If thinking includes such activities as perception, assumption, inference, generalisation, description and judgement, literate thought allows for the recognition of thinking activities for what they are: perception as perception, assumption as assumption, etc. It also allows for the discernment of relations among utterances. While literate thought is not restricted to written discourse, and is normally embedded in oral discourse too, the ability to make this kind of distinction and to reflect upon representations is honed in the activity of textual interpretation, as ‘thinking about text requires that a reader learn how to take texts in various ways and adjudicate these possible ways in the light of evidence’ (1994:281). Just as surely, however, it is dependent on producing representations as well as interpreting them; just as to be fully competent in a language means being able to understand it as well as speak it, write it as well as read it. To produce a representation one must be conscious of the act of interpretation to which they are geared; conscious, that is, that they will be ‘taken’ and reflected upon in the ways outlined above, and thus be capable of taking and reflecting upon them oneself: literate thought is self-conscious thought all the way through.

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<sup>7</sup> Olson describes this as ‘assigning an appropriate illocutionary force to an expression or representation’ (1994: 279).

From these considerations, it is evident that writing is not an inert tool; the very act of writing develops and forms thought.<sup>8</sup> This is true not only at the broad social levels (i.e. with respect to what goes to form the most important characteristics of the mode of thought of whole societies and cultures), but also on the level of the development of the thought of individual. As one philosopher deeply bothered by the downturn in students' literacy during the 1980s put it: 'One of the reasons we force ourselves and our students to put [our philosophical positions] into words is that the exercise gives them shape, defines them, transforms them' (Pletcher 1993:111). On this view, thought depends for its contour, its content and its clarity on the process of writing. And I think that this will be something with which we are all familiar: the feeling that we do not really know what we think until we try to write it down—and the writing can surprise us.

Written discourse is usually associated with the rise of individualism and with the conception of individual responsibility for one's beliefs. Writing and reading are solitary, private and silent activities of the individual withdrawn from the cacophony of the communal forum. This needs to be kept in balance with the fact that literacy is a social condition. Reading and writing imply participating in a 'textual community' (Olson 1994:273): a group of readers and writers who share ways of interpreting, and who share a body of texts, as well as ways of applying them. This in part has to do with the power and prestige associated with textual repositories of knowledge; in academic contexts, it also has to do with the way in which the nature and content of a discipline are specified: that is, by reference to paradigms and discourses.

### 1.3.2 Speaking up for Orality

Primary orality is, from the perspective of a literate society, irrecoverable. Oral discourse in a literate society is shot through with literate thought, and this is especially the case in academic contexts. In the preceding section we saw that the higher-level cognitive faculties that form the core of philosophical competence, are embedded in literate thought, and that these are honed and developed through the practices of interpreting and producing text. Oral discourse, however, has other features which give it its time-honoured place in academic institutions. Some of these are:

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<sup>8</sup> This need not be construed in the Derridean sense of writing as a rival to intention and thought in the determination of the meaning of an utterance.

- immediacy;
- directness;
- collaboration;
- community.

All of these features are a corollary of the fact of the embodied presence of the participants in oral discourse. There is a more spontaneous and immediate give-and-take between interlocutors (which I take up in section 1.4 as being particularly valuable for philosophical argument); though less structured and organised and more redundant than written discourse, some things—such as attitudes and turn-taking protocols—are conveyed extremely economically, through tone, gesture, and other forms of body language. Despite the many virtues of written language, it can also be overly formal and rigid, or overly ‘worked’, and so lack the straightforwardness and directness of which spoken discourse is capable. Oral discourse tends to be more communitarian and less centred on the individual than written discourse, or at least, to lend itself to this more easily (the flipside of this is that it can also be more authoritarian if one person takes over the conversation, by social or institutional position—for example, a lecturer in a lecture hall—or by sheer force of personality and loudness of voice). That which emerges from oral dialogue can more readily give a sense of shared ownership, of having sprung from the dialogue itself, rather than on having been foisted on it from some external force. Oral practices, in addition, give an immediate and more real sense of community or intersubjectivity than is possible with predominantly textual practices.

In academic learning, it is important to allow not only for much practice in using and manipulating the discourse of the discipline, but to allow for diverse practice: not only through reading and writing, but speaking too. This can be an extremely important aspect of a student’s competence in the discipline, as verbal expression of their ideas, understandings and positions, forces him or her to think about these in a different way than when writing, or even thinking about a text they are reading. The greater variety of expressions an idea is given, the better. In section 3.3 we shall see that with on-line technologies a form of oral-written discourse has emerged which combines aspects of both, and which it may be useful to exploit as a form of discursive practice.

## 2. Philosophy

It has already been mentioned that philosophical skills are concentrated in higher-level cognitive skills; further that these are the very skills that are encouraged by constructivist teaching principles and that are in turn associated with success in academic contexts which are contexts of descriptions and representations rather than of direct or unmediated knowledge; in addition, the ability to produce and manipulate representations specific to the discipline one is studying is central to an understanding of that discipline, and full participation in the discipline. This, we saw, is particularly true of philosophy which is thoroughly discursive. I have also argued that these skills are intertwined with literate thought; this underscores the importance of getting students to participate in the discourse of the discipline they are studying in particular by written and interpretive interactions with it. However, the more intersubjective and communal aspects of a discipline are enhanced by oral discourse, particularly dialogue. In addition, oral expression of ideas reinforces and/or feeds into students' 'at home-ness' in a discipline, not least by giving them further practice in a different representational medium than writing.

Before we can begin to broach the question which technologies to use in teaching philosophy, and how to use them, we need to have a clear idea of what we expect philosophy students to be capable of doing. Which skills receive most attention depends to some extent on the philosophical tradition in which teachers operate. UK departments of philosophy are predominantly analytical and so skills of analysis and argument will tend to come to the fore; a more historical and usually Continental approach will instead tend to privilege interpretation and exegesis. However, in practice, the division is rather artificial, and I think that there can be substantial agreement that the three most important philosophical skills that we try to develop in our students are (1) analysis, (2) argument, (3) interpretation. In fact, these three skills are interwoven as analysis requires interpretation, and argument depends on the prior abilities to analyse and interpret correctly other philosophical positions.

Below is a very brief outline of each of what we expect successful philosophy students will be able to do with respect to each of these skills.

### Analysis

Students must be able to:

- analyse a philosophical problem or position into its component parts and be able to tell how they are connected together;
- analyse an argument into premises and conclusions, and reconstruct the structure of the argument, filling in implicit premises where necessary;
- analyse philosophical texts into sections and be able to see the connections between sections.

### Argument

This has two aspects: the evaluation of arguments, and the construction or advancing of arguments. Some of the skills involved in this are:

- understanding of the standard fallacies;
- being able to distinguish between inductive and deductive arguments, and being able to say what constitutes an acceptable argument of both kinds;
- understand the role of counter-examples and be able to use them;
- understand the role of analogies and be able to use them;
- understand the role of thought experiments and be able to use them.

### Interpretation

Here we expect students to grasp the meaning of philosophical concepts, propositions and texts. What constitutes successful interpretation is a contentious issue, but for the purposes of this study, I shall assume that there is agreement as to what would constitute an inept interpretation on the one hand, and a valid (though not necessarily merely for that reason acceptable) interpretation on the other. I take it that such agreement would include the following points:

- Interpretations should be coherent in that they should not contain inconsistencies or contradictions.
- Interpretations should be cogent in that they should account for as much of the text as possible within a unified framework.
- Interpretations should be informed by an understanding of the historical tradition in which the text is embedded and the meanings of concepts and terms as specified within that tradition. As a



minimum, this should include some knowledge of history of ideas in philosophy<sup>9</sup>.

Another important aspect of philosophical interpretation is the very ability to pick out the arguments in a text, and to reconstruct them. Students should be able to pick out the difference between a claim and evidence for the claim; as well as between specific arguments and the broader conceptual framework and view that informs arguments. They should also be able to see the relation, if there is any, between the issues addressed in the historical text, and the issues of contemporary philosophy.

At present, most UK philosophy departments divide teaching and learning between spoken and written media. Teaching tends to be predominantly oral—apart of course from reading that students are expected to do—and testing tends to be predominantly written. Teaching itself is usually divided between lectures and some sort of discussion forum, be this in seminars or tutorials. Obviously there is a great deal of variation between institutions, faculties and individual lecturers.

Pedagogically, the most important thing a lecturer can do for her students is to get them to *do* philosophy. Active doing is essential to philosophy because of its very nature as a persuasive discourse: students need to decide whether they are persuaded, but in order to do that, they must do the reasoning for themselves, and evaluate it. A student who simply assimilates the thought of philosophers she reads about, and perhaps is able even to reproduce it in the form of summaries and paraphrases will not generally have understood much.

## 2.1 The intersubjective nature of philosophy

Philosophy is an *interactive* and *intersubjective* discipline. As is the case with all communication, philosophical communication is dialogical, in that it is geared towards the addressee.<sup>10</sup> But this is of particular significance in philosophy, since philosophical discourse is pre-eminently persuasive. A philosopher attempts to persuade others to her position, by laying out the reasoning which justifies it. This lies behind the argumentational style

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<sup>9</sup> The minimum is what I take to be desirable for students of philosophy in order to cultivate in them a sense of the importance of scholarship in a department which does not have a highly historicist bent. For such departments, obviously a richer background knowledge will be desirable.

<sup>10</sup> In the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin.

for which philosophy is known, particularly Western philosophy. Philosophical discourse is an invitation to others to participate in the unfolding of the argument presented and philosophical communication will fail if the addressee does not follow the reasoning and evaluate it. Thus, philosophical discourse has an in-built agreement to subject one's thoughts and ideas to the critical scrutiny of others. It is through this intersubjective endeavour that a theory develops and becomes robust as it withstands and responds to critical scrutiny.

Sometimes this process is criticised for being adversarial, and for being overly ego-centric and indeed ego-bruising. When pursued for the purposes of jointly arriving at the most robust possible theory, however, it can be, and has proved to be, very fruitful. Participation in this kind of dialogue places the emphasis on advancing and evaluating justifications for a theory, and in so doing develops in participants a better understanding of the theory, of its consequences and implications and just what kind of commitments it entails and what kind of framework inform it. The adversarial method can be looked upon as the philosophical equivalent of scientific testing in that it exposes the fault-lines in a philosophical theory, or even—though far less frequently (and in this too it is not dissimilar from the actual practice of scientific testing)—when it is time to give up on a theory. It thus promotes a deeper understanding of the theory as one defends it against the criticisms of others<sup>11</sup>.

The adversarial method does not, of course, exhaust philosophical method or philosophical dialogue. Not all of the interaction that occurs is adversarial in nature, if this implies that it relies on negative responses to a theory. Exposing one's thoughts and ideas to others can also elicit refinements of the theory or result in developments unforeseen by the person who originally advanced the idea. And it can, of course also elicit approval and appreciation. Indeed, the adversarial method works best with it establishes consensus as well as disagreement; that is, as dialogue progresses, differences in positions emerge against a background of agreement and consensus. The label 'adversarial' does however capture the argumentational nature of philosophical dialogue: the fact that one attempts to win others to one's point of view, with the expectation that agreement will have to be pursued rather than taken for granted, or that one's claims will meet with resistance. However, because of the negative connotations of the term 'adversarial', I shall use the terms 'argumentational dialogue' or simply 'dialogue' in this study.

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<sup>11</sup> See Taliaferro & Chance (1991).

## 2.2 Written vs. oral in philosophy

Apart from the intertwinement of higher-level cognitive skills with writing and reading, and academic discourse generally, there are other good reasons for eliciting written discourse from students of philosophy. Writing facilitates the ordering and organisation of thought at least in part due to its removal from the immediacy and spontaneity of spoken dialogue; it also develops and forms thought, and allows for the development of sustained argument, which in turn produces richer and deeper philosophical thought. The place of writing in philosophy is well-attested by the place that it holds in the assessment of students' philosophical abilities. Even though writing philosophy is enormously important for grasping philosophical ideas (not merely conveying a grasp thereof, but going a long way towards forming its content), as teachers of philosophy we know how seldom it actually is the expression of a student's own views on a topic. Students often churn out the rhetoric of arguing for and against positions, which to a large extent they have gleaned from secondary sources, and on which they do not, often, have real positions of their own. In my own experience, I have often found that in a tutorial situation, students will have produced an essay which appears to reproduce the kind of discourse which seems to be expected of them, but when asked to *verbalise* their position or a particular concept, principle or argument, they either have great difficulty in doing it or simply cannot. I think that the difficulty for students lies in the fact that it is possible to parrot academic discourse to a certain extent, and that we as lecturers and tutors are so used to the discourse ourselves that we fail to see whether what they write represents an authentic appropriation of material on the part of students. In part, this is due to the fact that the ideas and concepts and theories are indeed embedded in the discourse to which we are inducting students, as we have already seen to be the case, and the ability to reproduce the discourse can sometimes fool us, as well as the students. This is why the request to express the ideas in the different register of oral discourse can often be extremely cognitively demanding for students, revealing gaps or incoherencies between what they express and what they think, and what, perhaps, they ought to think. This is a further reason why it is important to try to get students to express their ideas in different registers.

This alone is good reason to provide opportunities for spoken as well as written philosophising. In addition, dialogue and discussion are invaluable resources due to the intersubjective nature of philosophy, in particular, the fact that it is both interpretational and persuasive. First,

the skill of attending to others' utterances in order to comprehend them as accurately as possible is developed; second, feedback to one's position is immediate, directing attention to unclarity of expression (which are also often unclarity of thought), and weaknesses (or strengths) in one's thought and expression, which can in turn be rectified, modulated or reinforced immediately; third, one is exposed to several different perspectives in a relatively short space of time, which results in one's own views being developed in greater awareness of the kinds of things that must be taken into account in building up that viewpoint. In addition, despite the fact that it is writing that is normally more closely associated with individualism, it is often in dialogue and discussion that we actually see students forming and 'owning' their own viewpoints. This may be because of their presence—that is, physical, embodied presence—or it may be simply because of the immediate give and take of dialogue and discussion, or because of the comfort with the discourse they are using, the greater authenticity that it has to students as being their own 'language'. All these benefits, however, are only really extracted from an ideal discussion situation: the price of these benefits is the type of disorganisation, irrelevancy, and redundancy which often characterises live seminars, subject as they are to the more volatile social dynamics of face-to-face meetings. Of course this can be beneficial, sometimes yielding unexpected insights and lines of thought. But each live dialogue involves a bit of a gamble concerning just how productive it will be.

Lastly, there are obviously the kind of reading skills that we expect students to have. This is also a matter of the intersubjectivity of philosophy, as well as of the broader academic context in which students enter a world of descriptions and representations. It is paramount that students read interactively, rather than passively: that is, that they experience themselves as addressed by the work, and engage with it, in a process of ongoing interpretation, commentary, applications, thinking out implications, making comparisons, and so on. Even though written discourse is linear, linear reading is not necessarily what we want to encourage, if linear reading is simply a matter of starting at the beginning and finishing at the end. We need to encourage interactive readings that loop back, that structure and re-structure, that make hypotheses which are refined, modified or rejected in a dynamic process. The very act of interpreting is itself a way of doing philosophy; but all too often, it is something which students do on 'automatic pilot'; something which they get out of the way in order then also to get their essays out of the way. Philosophical texts are often difficult and not of the most 'reader-

friendly?; any way to break the barriers to engaging with texts must be a welcome addition to teachers' resources.

In view of the general pedagogical principles that I have outlined, and of the specific aims of philosophy, what do on-line environments offer that can further these principles and aims? In the next section, I discuss three benefits of using on-line technologies which I take to be of particular interest to teachers of philosophy. As will be seen, these are not systems that can be left to take care of themselves, and each of the benefits is to be gained only at some cost (especially initially) in terms of time and effort. Lecturers will want to know whether it is worth expending the time and effort for the benefits that might accrue. The following will, I hope, help them to decide.

### 3. Central resources of online environments for learning

Some encompassing reasons that the internet may be conducive to active, engaged learning may be its allegedly democratic, open and participative nature, but whether it in fact has these characteristics is a moot point.<sup>12</sup> Here I shall concentrate on three reasons why online environments stimulate active learning. Online environments make available resources that:

- facilitate collaboration;
- facilitate interactivity;
  - with others;
  - with reading material;
- are a text-based form of communication.

In listing these three central resources, I have limited myself to the resources geared towards discussion, and so have not considered the Internet as a source of information, or further applications of online learning environments.<sup>13</sup>

#### 3.1 Collaboration

The Internet is *the* space of interpersonal connections, and facilitates collaboration simply in virtue of that. In fact, it is not only conducive to collaboration, but engenders it. It must not be forgotten that the Internet is also at the centre of the so-called 'knowledge economy', being an

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<sup>12</sup> See Gordon Graham (1999).

<sup>13</sup> But see Garth Kemerling (2002).

economy in which working relations are more collaborative than ever before, and working contexts are highly relational, intersubjective and consensual; there is not much space in this type of working environment for the lone individual plugging away single-handedly at a problem. The rhetoric with which it is accompanied tends to stress interactivity and deregulation, heterarchy rather than hierarchy, horizontal relations between participants rather than vertical relations between superiors and subordinates. Collaboration is very much the name of the game, and it happens also to be the game that the Internet is most appropriate for.

The most important ways in which collaboration is facilitated is by email, listserv, discussion boards and chatrooms. Communication takes the form of one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many discussions. There are two main types of discussion: synchronous and asynchronous. Among all these options, there are obviously many permutations possible.

Synchronous discussions occur in real time, and require the contemporaneous presence of all participants. They are most likely to occur in chatrooms, though email is so fast as to sometimes have the same effect on a one-to-one basis (unless others are copied into messages). Asynchronous discussions do not occur in real time and so do not require the contemporaneous presence of all participants; there is a delay between messages and responses, though not so much of a delay as to diminish the over-riding discussion ‘feel’.

## **Differences between synchronous and asynchronous on-line conversations**

One of the most important advantages of asynchronous on-line conversations is that no special time must be set for them. It is often difficult to find a time that will suit all students, or even a small group of students, for synchronous discussions.

In asynchronous written conversations—such as through a discussion board—participants have time to read others’ contributions carefully and to think about the wording and substance of their own response. In synchronous written conversations—such as through a chat facility—there is pressure to respond quickly, in fact, almost as quickly as in face-to-face conversations. Good chat participation may be impeded by a lack of fast and accurate typing skills. Most chat facilities have a limit as to how many characters they allow in each message; this and the real time constraints make chat better for quick repartee, than for discussing issues that require some depth. By contrast, asynchronous

conversations allow for more substantial, better thought-out and longer responses. The length of messages is however ultimately limited by the nature of on-line give and take: even asynchronous conversations have a faster turnover than is traditionally the case with written discourse, and related to this is the fact that the medium does not support overly long conversation 'turns'.

Synchronous conversations often have a chaotic feel to them, which is especially evident when the transcripts are re-read. The responses do not flow as they would in a normal conversation, in particular if there are many participants. The protocols for synchronous conversations are only now emerging, but need to be set up to govern things like turn-taking, and, in the case of many-to-many chats, to make it explicit who or what points are being addressed. When there are a number of participants, there is a danger of many of the messages being at cross-purposes, and there is a concomitant lack of coherence. In my own experience of conducting on-line chats with 8 to 10 students, I felt as though I were in a room-full of people, all talking to me at once and demanding attention at once. This was unnerving and a deeply unsatisfying teaching experience, since I felt that none of the issues raised was getting the attention deserved. The chats seemed to be experienced by students as a kind of 'cocktail hour' after lectures; they wanted an opportunity to raise issues and put forward questions but not really to engage with them fully. I have also used chat software that allows the tutor to moderate the conversation: participants' messages are sent first to the tutor in a separate window, and the tutor decides if and in what order they will appear in the main window. This takes quite some skill, and puts the tutor under great pressure, not least because it appears rude not to be attending to someone's message. It also has a slightly disjointed effect for participants, who do not see their messages appearing as soon as they type them.

There is much more potential for synchronous conversations to be useful on a one-to-one basis, particularly in a structured conversation: for example, something along the lines of a Socratic dialogue in which each participant argues for an opposing point of view. Used in this way, it can be used to encourage students' ability to think on their feet (or through their fingertips!), something akin to learning to play timed chess.

In asynchronous conversation, on the other hand, one does not expect an immediate response. Whether there is greater continuity and coherence, and a better flow depends on how the discussion board arranges messages (whether, for example, there is a topic tree, or

whether messages are simply listed chronologically). It also depends greatly on how the discussion is moderated (more on this later).

Much has been written on the fact that online conversations lack the kind of contextual signs that are present in face-to-face conversations, the most important of which are those conveyed by body language, expression, gesture and tone, which can convey very economically what it is rather laborious and stilted to convey in written language. This is, of course, one of the sources of the formality of written language, which is decontextualised (or at least, more so than spoken language) and so requires formal written protocols for conveying phatic functions.<sup>14</sup> In keeping with the relative informality of online discussions, this has resulted to many resorting to ‘emoticons’: smiley faces, and so on (and to many others being greatly annoyed by them). But these are deliberately or self-consciously used, and so do not replicate the enormous number of non-deliberate cues given in face-to-face conversations. In a face-to-face seminar or tutorial, it is possible to gauge when students understand or are struggling even when this is not immediately apparent from what they say. In on-line discussions, much more must be made explicit, while avoiding heavy-handedness; this is one of the reasons that they require almost as much attention to interpersonal skills as to knowledge of the material being discussed. This may, however, be attributable to the fact that the norms of on-line discussions are in the process of being conventionalised<sup>15</sup> With time, this aspect may become easier.

The lack of personal embodied presence is not always a drawback. It has also been noted that online discussions do not make apparent racial differences or class differences conveyed by accent, clothing, demeanour, etc. and so allow for a social dynamic free of stereotyping or cultural assumptions. Students who would not always participate in face-to-face exchanges do so more freely in online discussions. However, differences in writing skills and in levels of literacy must not be ignored here: it has also been noted that students who are not so confident of their writing skills are afraid to participate in these discussions, for fear of being embarrassed.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there are still some important gender differences with respect to the amount and

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<sup>14</sup> In the terminology of Roman Jakobson, the phatic function of a communication situation ensures that contact is ongoing. For example, utterances such as ‘Can you hear me?’ have a phatic function.

<sup>15</sup> See Ferrara, Brunner and Whittemore (1991:10).

<sup>16</sup> See Tsui & Wing (2002).



manner of participation in online discussions.<sup>17</sup> The online world is not as much of an equaliser as is often given to believe. However, it does seem to be the case that shy students, from whom it is difficult to get input in face-to-face contexts, do participate more readily in online discussions.<sup>18</sup>

It seems that the Internet is especially geared towards superficial social relations between people grouped together for particular purposes or in view of some interest (Castells 2000:389). It has not replaced face-to-face interaction, but seems, where possible (that is, where not impeded by great geographical distances), to result in more face-to-face interaction than people would otherwise have. For our purposes, the way in which online discussions feed into and improve the quality of face-to-face interactions will be a particular concern. However, a study of this type would be incomplete without taking into account the reservations of those who, like Hubert Dreyfus (2001), stress how impoverished is the online world in comparison to the face-to-face world, with particular reference to academic contexts. Dreyfus is no doubt correct in pointing out that recognising relevance requires embodied presence, that academic learning occurs as much by imitation of embodied representatives of a discipline as by the kind of skills that I have listed above, that involvement and presence are important, possibly essential, for the acquisition of skills, and that our sense of reality and commitment are closely connected similarly requires dealings with fully present others. There is no doubt that eliminating face-to-face interactions where they are possible in favour of online interactions is not a good idea, simply because there is much more to academic contexts—even philosophical ones—than abstract knowledge. While a mass replacement of face-to-face teaching with distance teaching is certainly not desirable, and ought to be resisted, it is also to be considered that distance education is an important equaliser with respect to access to higher education, and that resources that enhance it are obviously to be welcomed. Bates, for example, reports on the fact that distance students who have had access to computer conferencing find it ‘a deeply satisfying and emotional environment’ (1995:210). My own experience with adult students on a distance course in philosophy predominantly carried out via online discussion (both asynchronous and synchronous) is that they respond very enthusiastically and warmly to the medium, on a social as well as academic level (or at least, the active

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<sup>17</sup> For example, see Herring (1996b).

<sup>18</sup> See for example Thomas (2002:352).

participants do). It would appear that online resources for discussion and collaboration undoubtedly do enhance distance education, bringing social as well as academic benefits. The issues concerning the extent and manner of usage of these resources differ widely across distance and face-to-face academic contexts, and not least of these are pragmatic and logistical issues; the present study, however, concentrates on the way these resources contribute to learning at a more cognitive level.

### 3.2 Interactivity

Collaboration goes hand-in-hand with interactivity. In an ideal collaborative environment, students interact both with each other and with the material that is being studied. That they do both is extremely important for the quality of the learning that takes place in an online forum, or it can come to be used as a purely social space. The kind of interaction to be encouraged is that which gets students to engage as fully as possible with the ideas and issues they are dealing with; but to do this, they need to engage with each other in ways that go beyond simply affirming one another. This happens a lot in online discussions, which are sometimes ‘pathologically polite’, and which one student interviewed by Rourke and Anderson described as being a matter of ‘mutual stroking’ (2002:12). Ways must be found in order to get students to interact critically but not antagonistically, with each other.

Ideally, participants interact with each other, *through* the ongoing common transcript of the discussion auto-generated by the discussion board tool. Discussion boards automatically create an archive of the discussion. Thus, the history of the discussion is retrievable; this means that participants in the discussion can return to and inspect previous messages, the development of the discussion can itself be reflected upon in order to see what kind of dynamics have led to the current state of the discussion, and messages can be linked back to previous messages in the discussion’s history.

This common file is a ‘shared object’, ‘built and shared by members’, which not only ‘provides opportunities for interaction’ (Harasim 1989:52), but is itself an object with which interactions occur. For example, the archive of the discussion invites interactive reading, that is, reading which does not proceed by passive absorption in a linear sequence, but reading which depends on readers to structure and organise the material as they choose the way they navigate through the archive.

## Interactive reading and the hypertext

Thus, online environments are conducive to interactivity in virtue of the collaborative structures they allow for, and in virtue of the way they have of organising text: or precisely, *not* organising it for the reader, but allowing the reader to organise and structure it, and in fact, giving the reader more responsibility for organisation and framing.<sup>19</sup> Hypertext (or linked texts) can be navigated in any of a number of ways; thus, it has precisely a web-like structure; it is dispersed rather than hierarchical, non-linear rather than linear (Kolb 1996:17). The linear format of a printed document does *not* mean that we actually read in a linear way, as any scholar knows, but it does mean that readers ‘interfere’ with the text in order to loop back, compare and contrast, and get from point to point in anything but the linear order; in hypertext, instead, there is no linear format to begin with. Rather the text is structured in a more web-like manner, which allows the reader to choose among several possibilities of ordering their reading. The difference lies merely in the in-built open-endedness of hypertexts.

A further important aspect of interactivity in online environments is that they invite participation in building up the hypertext, particularly in a discussion, where the archive of the discussion can be added to by participants. This invitation to participate is an aspect of the non-closure of the hypertext in a discussion context, which can be added to, in principle, indefinitely.<sup>20</sup> Open-endedness is thus manifested in two ways: in the possibilities for alternatives to linear reading, and in the possibility of adding to the text.

While this may allow for a more interactive reading, in which readers have more responsibility for structuring and ordering the text for themselves, it can also lead to superficiality and incoherence.<sup>21</sup> It gives rise to the impression that one often has on the Internet of information overload, without an englobing framework to make sense of the information. Learning how to structure texts is probably one of the most basic reading skills that students need to develop, as it is the first step to analysing and making sense of it. Hypertext may have an in-built open-endedness, but students do not have an in-built knowledge of how to deal with the open-endedness. This is what they learn as they learn the

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<sup>19</sup> Although this responsibility is not absolute. See Floridi (1999:117-129) on hypertexts.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, this is a global feature of the Web as such: in principle, anyone can have a web-site.

<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly: closure and structure go hand-in-hand, as Roland Barthes has shown (1990).

discipline they are studying. Thus non-linear interactive reading may sound good, but can also waste a lot of time and lead to readings which are the very opposite of engaged, as students simply skim from link to link.

For educational purposes, hypertext therefore needs to be structured, and some kind of closure brought about (even if possibly only porous, as Kolb advocates (1996:23)). Online environments have the potential to be very useful, but only with quite some intervention on the part of teachers. This sounds as though we're bringing the authoritarianism back in, but not a lot is achieved, pedagogically speaking, in its total absence.

### 3.3 Text-based communication

The Internet is a multimedia space, and while there are no doubt many applications of the multimedia environment which are useful to educators, the overwhelming number of communications that it facilitates are text-based. At any rate, in this study I concentrate on the text-based communications facilities of discussion boards and hypertext. The fact that discussions occur through the written medium is an important educational resource in and of itself, and one which is particularly useful for philosophy.

Communication on discussion boards is written but has many of the features associated with oral communication<sup>22</sup>. Much of this is simply a matter of the in-built temporality of on-line communications, which have an immediacy approaching that of oral communication. There is a much faster give-and-take, or contribution and response time with computer-mediated communication than there is with other forms of written discourse. We have by now all experienced this with email communications, which seem to demand quicker attention than do letters that arrive by ordinary mail. The time factor affects the length of messages too: the medium is not conducive to very long messages, which fail to hold attention, just as face-to-face dialogues are not conducive to one person holding the floor for a great length of time, and where this does occur, it can be experienced as rude or socially inept. The Web, it must be said, is over-all a space which is conducive precisely to surfing, rather than to sustained attention, this being the scarcity which drives its particular economy. The most successful messages are those which are

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<sup>22</sup> See Feenberg (1989); Kolb (1996); Yates (1996); Ferrara, K., Brunner, H., Whittemore, G. (1991).

concise, to the point, and demand attention fairly directly. One of the best ways of achieving this is by evoking or eliciting response from others. Perhaps because of this more explicit conative function<sup>23</sup>, which makes them explicitly other-oriented, the messages in online discussions, though written, approach the personal and informal tone of oral communications.

Although online discussion technologies abbreviate the time between contribution and response, giving these discussions the feel of oral give-and-take, they in fact allow for more careful expression and formulation than oral turn-taking, as well as for reflection on one's own and others' messages, and for revision. Again, the explicit other-orientation of these messages means that there must be an attempt to make oneself clear and comprehensible to the other (with the concomitant increase in clarity and comprehension in one's own thought). Some researchers claim that participating in asynchronous discussions is especially conducive to enhancing literate forms of higher order thinking, since 'participants read, actively choosing nonlinear pathways through online texts or hypertexts, thus constructing their learning experience by choosing what they will read, and in what sequence' (Lapadat 2002:7). In the previous section it was seen that non-linearity is not in itself a virtue, easily giving way to incoherence and superficiality; thus whether this benefit really does accrue, will depend to a large extent on measures taken to prevent this from occurring.

The important thing about the language of online discussion messages, is that it remains close enough to the linguistic and discursive register in which the person is most comfortable, while also approaching a more formal, organised, structured and academic register. Ideally, in the language of these messages, students should be 'trying out' the discourse of the discipline they are studying in a non-threatening way; there should be a process of adequation between students' language and that of the discipline. Especially significant should be those points where students discover that they cannot express their ideas except by taking on the discourse of the discipline; these might mark turning points in students' authentic appropriation of the discourse. The claim may be made that just because academic learning involves dealing with representations, and that is, both manipulating and producing them in as many diverse ways as is useful to the discipline, getting students to use this particular medium will give students more practice in doing so, in a

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<sup>23</sup> In Jakobson's terminology, the cognitive function of an utterance is its orientation towards eliciting a response from the addressee.

way that could reinforce and supplement their reading, writing and speaking. The medium of text-based communication falls between essay-writing and oral communication. Effective messages in online discussions are those which are concise and to the point, and this is a skill which stands students in good stead in learning how to express their ideas. Apparently it was Wittgenstein who insisted, in a weekly meeting for philosophical discussion at Cambridge, that no participant's contribution should last for longer than two minutes. I am not sure whether this can be attributed to Wittgenstein, but at any rate, the rule does make for the acquisition of some very useful expressive and philosophical skills, such as distinguishing the main points of what one wants to say, and saying it as economically as possible. This is a skill which would enhance students' essay writing, where it is appropriate for them to develop points and deepen their understanding of the topic, but where learning to distinguish between what is and what is not relevant says as much about their grasp of the topic as does their ability to say it concisely. It also sharpens their skills for oral discussions, as they gain practice in maintaining relevance and in expressing their ideas succinctly.

Many researchers are very optimistic about the contribution that written interactions can make to the development of students' skills. Writing, Lapadat (2002) suggests, is always more formal than speaking, even in the context of online discussion, and so will tend to encourage greater reflection. She claims that the messages in asynchronous discussion are content-laden and lexically dense; thus participants both read material which is cognitively demanding, and express themselves in writing too, with all the benefits for literate higher-order thinking that this implies. There is, however, some controversy over whether the messages in discussion forums really do have this character, both with respect to their content, and to the levels of engagement and interactivity that actually occur in them. We need to question, therefore, whether using this forum to give students practice in learning the ropes of a discourse is as useful as it seems it should be.

#### 4. Testing the claims: On-line discussion

The educational literature on the use of computer-mediated communication is overwhelmingly positive. Even though problems are pointed out, on the whole there is a tendency to treat these as surmountable, and furthermore, worth surmounting. Whether this is simply initial enthusiasm for a novelty is difficult to say; in principle, however, there is good reason for affirming the potential of online resources for enriching higher education. That online discussion is invaluable for distance education is difficult to gainsay: this is an arena where the problems are well-worth surmounting, as they offer opportunities for discussion that students would not otherwise have. There is a further question whether they should replace whatever opportunities for face-to-face discussion may traditionally have been relied upon in distance education, but in the absence of face-to-face discussion they should surely be pursued. In residential or traditional face-to-face higher education institutions, the question is whether and how these resources should be used to supplement face-to-face teaching. As will be clear in this section, there are challenges to using discussion forums to achieve the ends for which they have the potential, and they require dedication on the part of teachers who wish to experiment with them.

If we take the SOLO taxonomy as a way of testing whether students' higher-level cognitive skills are enhanced by participating in online discussions, there is conflicting evidence. Whittle, Morgan & Maltby (2000) used the taxonomy to analyse students' contributions to an online discussion, and their overall performance in a course (which happened to be on the use of multimedia in education), and found that 'there was a close, positive association between students' SOLO levels, their engagement with content, and their final grades'. To be more specific: of 12 students who participated,

‘one student [...] achieved the extended abstract (b) level; six reached extended abstract (a) level; one reached relational (b) level; two reached relational (a) level; and two students [...] failed to demonstrate that they had reached the relational (a) level of conceptual understanding. [These students] did not pass the Unit and they had the lowest levels of engagement with content in the class. Of the seven students who developed extended abstract SOLO levels; three [...] demonstrated very high levels of engagement with content, and two [...] were awarded high distinctions for their final grades.’

On this study, then, it would appear that participating in online discussion was certainly beneficial for students.

A study undertaken by M.J.W Thomas (2002), also using the SOLO taxonomy, came to very different conclusions. For this study, 69 students participated<sup>24</sup> in discussions for first- and second-year undergraduate courses. The discussions took place in three themes, with each theme corresponding to one segment of the course. Participation in the discussions was compulsory and part of the students' final assessment. The findings were markedly different for the first two themes than for the third. In the first two themes (chronologically, the first two segments of the courses on which the discussions were based) there was a relatively high level of cognitive engagement, with the majority of messages being coded under the multistructural and relational categories of the SOLO taxonomy. In the third theme, it was expected that students' cognitive engagement would increase but instead it decreased: more specifically, there was an increase in multistructural content, yet a decrease in relational and extended abstract content. As Thomas points out: 'This suggests that in the third theme, students were not integrating concepts related to the discussion topic, nor achieving a level of personal meaning that could be abstracted' (2002:354). Three reasons are put forward for these findings: the students' relative lack of familiarity in the field (which would bring it about that most of their interactions remained at the multistructural level); increased study load and impending examinations during the third theme; and a third reason which it will be useful to quote in full:

Students' familiarity with the online discussion forum and its particular mode of learning, resulted in a shift away from an overtly academic and highly structured discourse. Therefore, some students' messages in the third theme were less like mini-essays on the discussion topic and were more familiar in their tone. Furthermore, there was an increase in short messages, where a student simply made a brief supportive comment to another, or passed on a reference. It is possible that when students engage in more interactive discourse, they are less likely to provide evidence of the complexity of their knowledge structures and are more likely to communicate in a less integrated or abstracted manner. Accordingly, the perceived decrease in cognitive engagement may be an artefact of an

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<sup>24</sup> Of which 40 females, 29 males; 83% under the age of 25; most students had good experience with computers and with the internet.



improvement in their use of the online discussion forum, rather than an actual decrease in the students' quality of learning. (2002:354)

Thomas goes on to consider overall structural features of each thread in the discussion. A threaded discussion is one which is organised into sub-headings under a general topic. As the discussion progresses, it becomes progressively more fragmented. As this occurs, there is more duplication in students' messages, and the messages that occur late in the discussion get less and less discussion. Thomas puts forward several reasons for this: first, it is claimed that the asynchronous mode of discussion leads to isolation and to students' messages being viewed as data to be stored rather than as a real contribution by another person in a dialogue; second, there is a lack of cohesion and coherence in the organisation of the discussion as threads branch off endlessly, without any apparent organisation; third, there is an unbreachable individuality built into written discourse as opposed to orality.

Thomas seems to labour under many assumptions concerning the nature of asynchronicity and oral versus written discourse in online environments. I hope to have tackled some of these in section 3.3. It must, however, also be noted that the discussions studied by Thomas were not actively moderated. Tutors or lecturers were involved only at the beginning of the discussion ('encouraging both students and 'theme' and each thread simply began as an initial posting'), and from then on, students could structure and organise entirely as they pleased. They could also create their own threads. The discussion studied by Whittle et al, however, firstly involved far fewer students, and second, was moderated by the tutor. It would appear that far greater control was exercised over the discussion from the outset, with '[t]he sequencing and nature of the assessment tasks [being] carefully structured to maximise students' participation, collaboration and active engagement with subject content' and '[t]he instructor [using] the discussion facility to provide timely feedback to students and to intervene to keep discussions on track and sustain their momentum' (Whittle, *et al.* 2000). It is not stated how threads were handled, for example, whether students could start their own threads, or only tutors could do so. And, as we have seen, this study came to far more positive conclusions.

There continues to be this balance of some negative results as against positive results, and especially a stress on the potential of online discussions to be useful in all the ways discussed above. For example, Rourke & Anderson quote the following summary of teachers' complaints concerning the new technologies for discussion:

Analysis shows that most messages are in the category of comparing and sharing information. There is little evidence of the construction of new knowledge, critical analysis of peer ideas, or instances of negotiation. The discussions do not appear to foster testing and revision of ideas and negotiation of meaning which are processes fundamental to higher order thinking. Only a small percentage of contributions can be categorized as higher order cognition and awareness of knowledge building. (McLaughlin and Luca, 2000, quoted in Rourke & Anderson: 2002).

There are other sources of conflicting evidence. A study of student teachers in online discussion focused on the question whether online discussions helped students to identify and to discuss taken-for-granted assumptions, and concluded that although these discussions generated a 'rich source of assumptions, students did not recognize them as such' (although this is also related to students' development) (Harrington & Hathaway 1994:553). When other students do draw attention to assumptions, there is often no response, indicating that there is also no change in the assumption. This in turn is contradicted by a study conducted by Judith Lapadat (2000), of an online interactive discussion forum of a graduate-level education course: she concludes that students do undergo conceptual change in such discussions, thus indicating that they do engage with one another's messages, and their own, reflecting on them and subjecting them to critical scrutiny.

One of the difficulties in coming to a principled decision on whether online discussion resources really do meet the educational goals that they are claimed to meet is that the studies are often difficult to compare, involving different numbers of students, different courses, different strategies, and so on. Nevertheless, there is still an over-riding positive mood concerning these resources, often even by those whose studies have turned up negative results<sup>25</sup>, which may well be because they are still in the stage of being given the benefit of the doubt. To make use of a principle from Lakatos' philosophy of science, this may be a period during which the hypothesis that computer-mediated communication leads to these learning benefits, is protected from disconfirming

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Harrington & Hathaway point out that 'Conferencing activities do appear to be uniquely suited for generating discussions of taken-for-granted assumptions ... In particular, [they] seem especially suited to helping students notice how what they fail to notice shapes their thoughts and deeds' (1994:552).

evidence, since there is good reason to think that ultimately it will be well-supported.<sup>26</sup>

In particular, more attention has been paid to the structure and organisation of online discussions. Even though the open-endedness of the online environment appears to allow for a more democratic and open participatory structure, in fact, unstructured discussions, or discussions without leadership do not work. This has been found to be the case in philosophy virtual seminars by Anthony Hatzimoysis, who writes that ‘in all cases where we set up a course forum, without defining main topics, but simply by letting students post messages, without any feedback whatsoever from a tutor, the forum would quietly but quickly die out’ (2002). If they do not die out, they are simply incoherent, superficial, and of scanty academic value. Coherence or structure is also an index of engagement on the part of participants with each other. In a discussion which becomes increasingly fragmented and dispersed, participants are not in fact responding to each others’ messages, so much as using them as catalysts for free associations. They do not give each other feedback, or take up each others’ points in a reflective manner. This can give rise to a discussion which is not so much a dialogue as a sequence of mini-monologues. A further problem that occurs here is that some participants use discussions as a kind of soap-box for holding forth—often at great length—on their own views. This happens with a certain kind of participant, probably reflective of a personality type as much as of anything else, who is perhaps not so good at real dialogue in any context, and is even less inhibited in a text-based environment. Overly long messages are a real impediment to useful online discussion, and undercut many of the benefits of the medium, not only with respect to keeping the discussion going (since others are likely to simply ignore the message and not respond) but also with respect to gaining practice in composing succinct, to the point messages which is one of the benefits of participating in these discussions. It is normally a good idea to include an explicit rule concerning the length of messages in the discussion rules or norms.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, short messages (‘I agree’, ‘Me too’) or no messages are obviously another impediment to discussions. Non-participation is one of the most prevalent problems in

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<sup>26</sup> This also motivates the drive to find different ways of analysing the content of messages for ‘cognitive presence’, for which taxonomies such as the SOLO taxonomy do not always yield the right results. See for example Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2001).

online discussions, and obviously, it is a problem which entirely negates the advantages thereof. Lecturers and tutors are unlikely to want to go to the trouble of setting up these discussions if they also have to coax students to participate. Again, it makes a big difference whether the discussion occurs in the context of a distance or face-to-face course; in the case of a distance course, some coaxing is not out of place, although it is also often the case that in these contexts, students are only too pleased to have the facility and require less coaxing. In the case of online discussions embedded within a face-to-face course, the rationale for using the medium must be made more explicit, with the benefits of participating made clear to students. It may also be appropriate to make participation compulsory, by, for example, making it a part of assessment. There are different ways of going about this, some of which will be outlined below. However, if lecturers do decide to opt for the compulsory route, they will have to be very committed to the medium themselves. Hatzimoysis (2002) remarks on the fact that asynchronous discussions are far less labour-intensive for tutors than are synchronous discussions, as they require, for a group of 30 students ‘a maximum of 2 hours per week for reading or commenting on student discussion, as opposed to a minimum of 6 hours per week for actually running each one of at least 6 different synchronous seminars’ (as students participate in synchronous seminars in groups of 2 to 5). I would dispute this: a well-run discussion needs almost daily attention from the discussion leader or moderator, and the moderating functions require more care and attention than can be achieved in 2 hours per week. In my own experience, the amount of time was closer to 2 hours per day or every second day. This may differ in a face-to-face context, but the success of the conference does depend on ongoing rather than sporadic participation by as many members as possible, and it is very much up to the moderator to keep this going. This is one of the over-riding practical reasons for setting up student-led as opposed to tutor-led discussions.

In the light of problems that have been encountered in these discussions, various researchers have outlined the kinds of activities that must be included in order to give the discussions more coherence and structure, and to ensure ongoing participation. Rourke & Anderson (2002:2-3) cite three roles or sets of responsibilities that must be addressed, relating to instructional design (selecting appropriate topics, implementing a discussion strategy, and establishing participation expectations), discourse facilitation (drawing participants in, establishing areas of agreement and disagreement) and direct instruction (presenting

concepts, diagnosing misconceptions). These roles are collectively referred to as 'teacher presence': however they do not all have to be taken on by the teacher, as the discussion of student-led discussion shows. Apart from aspects which the teacher may have the main responsibility for (in particular relating to instructional design, and possibly monitoring direct instruction) there are also moderator functions. The moderator of a discussion is something like a 'social host' or 'meeting chairperson' (Feenberg 1989:33). That moderating makes as many demands on social skills as on knowledge of the material being discussed I would attest from personal experience of moderating online discussions in a distance course: one has to be adept both at reading for social cues and at writing in such a way that social cues are embedded in what one writes without appearing stilted and strained (and possibly without resorting to the dreading emoticons!)<sup>27</sup>. In fact, the social aspect is possibly the greatest demand on the moderator, although this may be specific to discussions conducted entirely in a distance medium, where the participants have no other form of communication with one another.

Feenberg provides the following summary of moderating functions:

### ***Contextualising functions***

Opening Discussion: Carefully designed opening comments should announce the theme of the discussion, and identify any shared experiences or symbols which can clarify content and purpose.

Setting Norms: A familiar communication model should be selected to establish tacit expectations about conference behaviour, and to suggest rules of behaviour.

Setting Agenda: The moderator controls the order and flow of discussion topics, and generally shares part or all of the agenda with participants at the outset.

### ***Monitoring functions***

Recognition: The moderator refers explicitly to participants to assure them that their contribution is valued and welcome, or to correct misapprehensions about the context of the discussion.

Prompting: To solicit comments from participants, either publicly or through private mail messages; might be formalised as 'assignments' in some conferences.

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<sup>27</sup> Walter Ong has many interesting things to say about the 'cultivated spontaneity' and 'self-conscious group-mindedness' of secondary orality that is a feature of the electronic age (2002:133-5).

### ***Meta-functions***

Meta-commenting: To remedy problems in context, norms or agenda, clarity, irrelevance, and information overload.

Weaving: To summarise the state of the discussion and to find unifying threads in participants' comments; it encourages these participants and implicitly prompts them to pursue their ideas (Feenberg 1989:35).

How many of the functions are actually carried out by moderators depends on the type and context of discussion. More social functions will be needed if the discussion is between participants who do not meet except on the discussion forum. In this case, it is important to do the kind of 'sharing of experiences' that announces a presence, in the same way as students would do on arriving in a seminar room, or during breaks. With respect to setting norms, it may be sufficient to include a link to a list of 'netiquette' rules; however, as people become more accustomed to the medium, the need for this kind of overt norm-setting will diminish.

At the cognitive level, the most important functions of the moderator during the discussion are the meta-functions. By providing feedback, keeping the discussion on-track, and weaving, the coherence of the discussion is maintained. What is desired is sufficient closure to give the discussion organisation and structure. It is paramount that there is a sense of return, and of messages looping back on other messages, rather than digressing further and further away from the main topic. A further function of the moderator should be that of deciding when a new thread should be started. That is, it is possible and even desirable to prevent all participants from having the option of starting a new thread, as this results in participants being 'drawn along constantly diverging paths', rather than being united in a common discussion (Thomas 2002:356). Apart from not making it possible for all participants to start a new thread, two activities are important for maintaining coherence and giving some closure to the discussion: the first is that of weaving, and the second that of summarising. Weaving involves periodically drawing together the messages of the various participants in order to provide a point of engagement between them. Thus if students are not engaging with one another's messages, the moderator can draw their attention to ways in which they could do so, by modelling the engagement and reflection for them at first, and then by encouraging them to do so for themselves. The second is that of providing a summary, either

periodically or at the end of the discussion. Some researchers<sup>28</sup> include 'seeking to reach consensus/understanding' as one of the responsibilities of teaching presence. Consensus is as important for discussions—and philosophical discussions in particular—as is disagreement or conflict. But if consensus on individual points cannot be reached, consensus on the summary, that is, on what the main points of agreement and disagreement in the discussion have been, is very important. This gives the discussion a goal, an ending point which serves as a provisional closure, or a resting point.

It is also important that the moderator create a space in which students feel safe from the possibility of embarrassment. Firstly, it is a good idea to have a spell-checker included in the discussion tool, so that messages can be checked (possibly automatically) before being sent. Secondly, any taking up of errors and misconceptions needs to be done in a diplomatic way, as there are not the non-verbal cues that might otherwise soften the correction. However, there is a difference here depending on whether the discussion is led by the tutor or by the students themselves. In tutor-led discussions, corrections are going to be just that: corrections; in student-led discussions, there are no corrections as such, only negotiations. It is, however, important that there be some etiquette guidelines as there is scope for misunderstandings and offence on these discussions. This is one reason why, even when tutors do not lead the discussion themselves, and opt for student-led discussions, it is a good idea for them to at least have access to the discussions, and to monitor them.

In the next two sections I discuss two strategies for conducting on-line discussions which seem to me to maximise their potential benefits for the teaching of philosophy in particular. These are (1) student-led discussions and (2) document-centred discussions

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<sup>28</sup> Such as Rourke & Anderson (2002:8).

## 5. Student-led discussions

Only well-moderated discussions are successful; moderation however is time-consuming, and could be a daunting task to add an already heavy teaching load. It was also seen that pedagogically, it makes good sense to give students greater responsibility for their own learning. This in turn is encouraged by a more collaborative approach, which encourages students to be active participants in the learning process, as they interact with each other and with the material they are studying. Thus it would seem that removing the tutor at least partially from the discussion would address both the needs of tutors, and those of students.

Student-led discussion is one way of achieving this. In this process, students are given responsibility for some of the moderating activities outlined above. Tutors still have responsibility for designing appropriate tasks, topics and questions, but the actual discussion is handed over to the students. This can be implemented either in distance or in face-to-face contexts.

The research into student-led discussions is very similar to that on online discussions: over-ridingly positive, with a few more negative voices. However, I believe that for the purposes of teaching philosophy, the positive outweighs the negative. The positive points are that in student-led discussions, (1) students are more uninhibited about asking questions and challenging the statements of others (Kremer & McGuinness 1998), (2) the students leading the discussion learn the material very effectively, as they tend to feel more responsible for the discussion, and so read assigned reading more carefully (Rourke & Anderson 2002, Ploetzner, Dillenbourg, Preier & Traum 1999), (3) student-led discussions have greater coherence and fluidity (Tagg 1994), (4) achieve higher levels of participation, and (5) student leaders are experienced by participants as being more responsive and interesting, leading to overall more positive attitudes towards computer conferencing (Murphy et al 1996). It is interesting that when students are asked to explain why they believe that the student-led discussion has been beneficial for them, they invoke a kind of social cognitive conflict theory (as described in section 3.1).

Negative points have also been raised, to the effect that there is too much affirmation of each other (the ‘mutual stroking’ mentioned in section 3.2), that there is a predominance of unsupported opinion, and that assumptions do not get questioned (mentioned in section 4); in addition, some students would rather learn from an expert than from



peers (Rourke & Anderson 2002:5). However, these particular problems should not occur in properly designed philosophical discussions, which are more directly focused towards the kind of give-and-take characteristic of arguments. Also, the discussions are not primarily for the transmission of information, but rather for learning the ropes of philosophical dialogue, and so there ought not to be a problem associated with lack of expertise in the content of the material. Indeed, Rourke and Anderson found that students' experiences 'confirm what is axiomatic in the literature on this topic: discussions are useful in achieving higher-order, but not lower-order learning objectives' (2002:16).

There are several different models for student-led discussions<sup>29</sup>. These can involve students at the same level of study, competence and ability, or at different levels, graduate students working with undergraduate students, or students from different institutions working together. For the purposes of this study, I have concentrated on peer groups consisting of students at the same level of study. When students are drawn from different levels of study, they act as peer tutors, rather than as discussion leaders. There may well be scope for this, just as there is for graduate students to lead undergraduate seminars and other discussion forums, but this is a different aspect of the distribution of teaching roles within a faculty or institution. Furthermore, using students at the same level to act as discussion leaders is more effective for the philosophical skills that we wish to foster in students. In short, we wish to get students to learn to analyse, interpret and put forward arguments. There is good reason to try to get them to develop these skills not only in dialogues with their tutors, but also in dialogues with each other. These two types of dialogue should in fact supplement each other. In dialogue with their tutors, students learn by imitation and modelling. However, in virtue of the tutor-student relationship, the expectation will be that the tutor is right, or knows the next step, or the right kind of moves to make, and that the student is simply not his or her equal. Indeed this is manifestly the case in many a Socratic dialogue, even though these are sometimes taken to be exemplary teaching practice, as Laurillard reminds us (2002:74-5). At best, the argument between tutor and student tends to be a 'mock' argument, since the student cannot really hope to persuade (although of course, sometimes they do make tutors see things differently). In arguments with their peers, however, the argument is more 'for real': they can persuade others or be persuaded.

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<sup>29</sup> See Falchikov (2001) for a very comprehensive overview of models.

But in order to be successful, they need to pay attention to what others are saying, learn to analyse and interpret others' contributions, draw out the implications thereof and reflect on how—or whether—to modify or adjust their own position. On-line discussions are a very good forum for learning philosophy by doing it. If students are to do philosophy on these discussions, it seems that there is no better way than for the tutor to retreat (although not completely) and let them get on with it.

Philosophy seems to be particularly well-suited to generating the kind of topics that will allow for 'structured academic controversies' (Falchikov 2001:57-8). Discussions that are structured around arguments have an immediate focus (which should in itself make them more coherent), and it is relatively easy to assign clear roles to students participating in the discussion (proponents and opponents of positions, initiators and summarisers, devil's advocates and defenders). Discussions designed in this way force students to reflect upon and engage with others' contributions, instead of being an inconclusive free-for-all.

The roles and responsibilities of setting up, maintaining, leading and concluding discussions can be divided up in various ways. Teachers have overall responsibility for instructional design and organisation; they are also responsible for monitoring the discussion, even while not taking a hands-on role, as well as for giving students recognition and reassurance<sup>30</sup>, and being available to guide discussion leaders when this is required; possibly, they can also give an assessment of the discussion at the end, giving feedback on its broad outlines, or any common misconceptions that may have occurred. They also need to make clear to discussion leaders and to participants what is expected of them, and where appropriate, assign roles.

Different models for discussion can be used. Generally, smaller groups (10 to 12 students) are better for online discussions, but the size depends on the nature of the discussion. Discussions for which participation is compulsory should be divided into groups, whereas non-compulsory discussions should have a larger number of participants, as not all will be active. In addition, a definite time-frame for the discussion needs to be instituted, since this provides an impetus for participation, and also serves as a kind of closure. One of the problems with engagement is that sometimes a participant will contribute to a thread long after others have moved on from it, and so receives no response and may drop out of the conversation. Setting a time-frame can also be

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<sup>30</sup> Tagg points out that these roles are more effective when carried out by the teacher (1994:47).

done in different ways, for example, by setting a time-frame for a particular topic (one or two weeks), or closing discussion on the threads of a particular time-period. Elapsed threads then become read-only.

Leadership roles are assigned where there are more than two students. In larger groups, either one student leads discussion, or teams of students do so. Students can be assigned the activities associated with facilitating discussions, as well as some of the instructional activities set out in the following table (Rourke & Anderson 2002:8): [over]

Roles	Responsibilities
<b>Instructional design and organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting curriculum</li> <li>• Designing methods</li> <li>• Establishing time parameters</li> <li>• Utilizing medium effectively</li> <li>• Establishing ‘netiquette’*</li> <li>• Making macro-level comments about course content</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitating discourse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying areas of agreement/disagreement*</li> <li>• Seeking to reach consensus/understanding*</li> <li>• Encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contributions*</li> <li>• Setting climate for learning</li> <li>• Drawing in participants, prompting discussion [in particular, encouraging participants to reply to each other—AC]*</li> <li>• Assess the efficacy of the process</li> </ul>
<b>Direct instruction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presenting content</li> <li>• Focusing the discussion on specific issues*</li> <li>• Summarizing the discussion*</li> <li>• Confirming understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback</li> <li>• Diagnosing misconceptions</li> <li>• Injecting knowledge from diverse sources</li> </ul>

[\* indicates responsibilities that can be taken on by student leaders]

## 5.1 Models for discussion

(1) Students assigned these responsibilities will need some guidance in how to carry them out. One way of getting students to learn how to do this is to start off by using the discussions to supplement face-to-face seminars. For example, a discussion topic is set for a seminar; students have one week to post preliminary input for the discussion on a discussion board, in the form of questions or comments. One student is given the task of summarising the input on the discussion board. At the seminar itself, the leader introduces significant ideas and points for discussion, drawing on the input, making connections or drawing contrasts. The leader is also responsible for facilitating the discussion in the face-to-face seminar, drawing in as many perspectives as possible and getting the group to explore the issues and ideas in a structured manner. Once the seminar is over, either the same student, or a different student is asked to provide a summary of the seminar discussion; the summary is posted onto the discussion board, and other students are invited to give or withhold their consent from it. Perhaps another student may feel that a point raised in discussion has not been dealt with properly in the summary and point this out. There may therefore be some further discussion regarding the summary of the discussion with is geared towards obtaining consensus from the group: if not consensus on every point, at least consensus of what the main point of disagreement might be. In this way, the discussion has a form of closure. Discussions of different seminars can also be compared and contrasted, for example, by linking the issues raised in different seminars. These discussion then becomes a course archive, which students can go over as they write their essays.<sup>31</sup> In a more ambitious project, essays too can be posted onto the course site, which students participate in building up. On this conception, the discussion board is but one of the tools available on a course site: other tools would be such as to allow students to post notices as well as their essays, or examples, or anything else they may see as contributing to the course.

Using online discussion to supplement face-to-face discussions in this way can be a good way of easing students into discussions that are held purely online; or perhaps, the combination will be found to be sufficient in itself. By combining the two forms of discussion, many of

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<sup>31</sup> The idea for this form of discussion was taken from Susan Spearey, 'Bridging Distances, Breaking Boundaries: Teaching South African Literature in Canada with the Aid of Web CT Technology' (forthcoming).

the benefits of online discussion are still to be had (such as getting students to formulate their ideas in a text-based but not essay-writing form, geared towards other students as their primary addressees); in addition, the seminars themselves are enhanced, as all students will have already contributed something, and will have been forced to think about the discussion beforehand—and again, afterwards, when they consider the summary of the discussion.

(2) Another way of helping students to lead discussion in the absence of supplementation by face-to-face seminars is by simply outlining to them what is expected of them: for example:

- 1) Post a welcome message and explain the assignment to participants.
- 2) Raise some preliminary issues, and elicit responses.
- 3) Post feedback to messages posted by participants; either individually or weave several messages together.
- 4) Compare and contrast messages, pointing out agreements and disagreements;
- 5) Invite participants to respond to each other.
- 6) Start new threads, as and when appropriate.
- 7) Elicit responses from individual participants ('so and so has disagreed with you, how will you respond?')
- 8) Raise further points that participants have not raised.
- 9) Summarise the discussion at the end, and post the discussion on the board to see whether participants agree with your summary.
- 10) Deal with any issues raised from your summary.

Teams can do this, as well as individuals. For example, one person can be given responsibility for 1) and 2); one or more for 3)–8); and another for 9) and 10). There is, however, possibly more coherence if one person or pairs take responsibility for the whole process. In this case, a strict time duration must be imposed on the discussion, or the period of time for which any individual or team is responsible for the whole discussion must be divided into manageable time units.

(3) A further way of conducting these discussions is by assigning roles to students, although this must not be done in an overly rigid way, as it tends to block dialogue. One type of role-taking that immediately presents itself is that of getting one student to take on the role of teacher for another (or others), with swapping of roles. This type of assignment is based on the premise that teaching is probably one of the best ways of learning; the student who is in the learning role also needs to be active in

asking questions, pointing out unclarities, asking for reformulations, putting forward interpretations and drawing out the implications of what the other has said, and so on. They then swap roles.<sup>32</sup>

Pre-assigning roles may seem to be excessively authoritarian; however it also makes it easier for many students to participate as they feel they are not so much exposing themselves as acting a role. It also gives them a way to start without agonising too much about what they have to say: they simply need to say something that will fit their role, at least to start off with. Thus, if a student is assigned the role of proponent of a claim, he or she simply needs to think about what it would take to propose the claim in the first place. However, roles can sometimes be too dogmatically enforced, or too narrowly defined. For example, on one model:

- One student makes a claim;
- Another student provides evidence for the claim;
- Another provides a counter claim
- Another provides evidence for the counter claim
- and so on<sup>33</sup>

The roles in this model are very narrow and rigid. Another possibility is to work with a semi-structured interface, which has pre-defined buttons, based on speech act theory, so that students tag their input with the type of speech act they are performing—for example: ‘I propose to ... ’ (Dillenbourg 1999:8). However, although I am saying this in the absence of empirical research, I feel that this too is to overspecify roles. The discussion has to maintain a balance between structure and fluidity.

Ideally, philosophy teachers will want discussions to get students to explore philosophical positions, and to develop philosophical skills. Where pre-assigned roles are used, I feel that it is more effective to group students simply into debating positions: proponents and opponents (or consequentialists and deontologists; internalists and externalists about justification; Cartesians and Humeans on the self, foundationalists and coherentists on knowledge—there is no dearth of possibilities in philosophy). Again, these roles can be assigned to individuals or teams. Students can either choose their own groups, or be

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<sup>32</sup> See Falchikov (2001: 20-22) for more on reciprocal teaching, and Ploetzner et al (1999) for more on why this works.

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, M.C., (n.d.) ‘Guiding Online Discussions: A Social Argument Framework’.

assigned to them. The difference is that self-chosen groups may be too homogenous to generate productive conflict, and may turn out to be too friendly or social; it is important to have a variety of viewpoints and abilities in a group, which the teacher will be more likely to have a better idea of than the students themselves. It is also a good idea to have students sometimes defending positions with which they are not naturally sympathetic. Being thus grouped means that students explore the position that they are defending, and understand it better as they defend it to others. In defending the position, they will formulate and reformulate the claims of the position, deal with counterarguments, and counterevidence, learn to use examples and analogies, and generally gain practice in basic philosophical skills. The basic strategies of philosophical argumentation can be listed alongside the list of expectations of participants in online discussions, in order to remind students of the options available to them in formulating their contributions and counter-responses. Thus, students will have an explicit set of guidelines, both for how to participate in and/or lead online discussions, and strategies they can use in formulating their messages.

Assigning students roles in this way is one way of instituting a structured academic controversy. This way of dealing with discussion can be done simply with pairs of students, and thus may require no leadership as such. In this type of assignment, two students each argue for a particular point of view. If this is set as a joint assignment for assessment purposes, the results could be very good. Indeed maximal participation could be achieved in this way, with minimum input from the teacher. One drawback of this method is that it does not give students the wide range of perspectives that they could get from a bigger group; also, the two students would have to be more-or-less equally matched for either to be gaining the full benefit. However, this is an easy and effective way of using the medium, and gaining many of the benefits of text-based collaboration.

With teams, there will be a wider range of perspectives, and there will also be the advantage of many students working together in order to come to the best possible formulation of a philosophical position, working off each others insights (hopefully, the result will be as with children working in teams to play Mastermind (p.6)). As mentioned, it is not necessary that students actually agree with the position they are to explore and/or to defend; indeed it is sometimes a good exercise to get them to speak on behalf of a position with which they are not particularly sympathetic. As soon as there are groups of students

working together, it is a good idea to have discussion leaders, or the discussion tends to become incoherent and dispersed. Here are two models for instituting this:

1. There is one discussion in which all students participate; all students are teamed into positions, except for the discussion leader, who acts as a kind of referee. The leader carries out all the moderating functions listed above. There could also be two leaders for such discussions, with one having the main responsibility for initiating discussion, and the other for summarising.
2. There are parallel discussions for each position, or discussion streams, and each team explores the position they will defend as fully as possible. Each team has a leader, who then submits the best points of the discussion to a joint discussion. Team members confer on responses in their own discussion streams. These discussion streams could be open or closed to members of the other team for the duration of the discussion (something like playing cards with an open or closed hand), but should be open to all at the end of the discussion. This form of discussion combines a more overtly consensus driven aspect in the work done by teams in arriving at the best formulation of the position they are defending, and a more overtly 'adversarial' aspect, when the teams act as opponents in a debate.

These then, are some of the methods that can be used for student-led discussions in philosophy. Even though they are student-led, and so will rely on students carrying out many of the moderating functions, teachers will need to monitor the discussions closely, 'looking in' on them regularly, and providing encouragement where necessary, or helping to keep the discussion on track. Teachers may wish to communicate privately with discussion leaders to help them regain control over the discussion if this is necessary. However, it is best for students to feel that the space of the discussion is their own, while at the same time having the sense of its occurring within the normal teaching framework. How much teacher involvement occurs will depend too on the level of study of the students: graduate students will probably need far less overseeing than undergraduate students.

All of these discussion possibilities can be used in distance or in face-to-face contexts, with variations where appropriate. The use of online discussion to supplement face-to-face meetings where these are



part of a distance programme can be very effective for making the best possible use of the relatively infrequent face-to-face meetings included in distance programmes. They also help to establish and to sustain a sense of a community of learners among distance students.

## 6. Document-centred discussion

There is a further discussion technique which I believe to be very useful for philosophical discussions, and this is document-based discussion. In this form of discussion, students collaborate to analyse and interpret a document. This is made possible by having annotation software, which allows for a text to be presented and annotated in an online environment, and for participants to share comments, in that they can view and respond to one another's comments.

There are several ways to present and annotate text in an online environment. In any VLE, it is easy enough to post texts or extracts of texts onto web-sites, for which they can then provide an online reading-guide. So, for example, one can simply use Microsoft Front Page to generate an annotated text—or even Microsoft Word. What does, however, require more sophisticated software is building in the interactivity which allows several people to make their own annotations and share them.

Before discussing the strategies that can be used for using these tools, an outline of why they are worth pursuing will be given.

Firstly, online documents, in principle at least, invite highly interactive, dynamic reading (as mentioned in section 3.2):

A central reason for the success of the Web is that it extends familiar notions from the world of paper documents to the world of interactive information systems. In fact, the Web is re-defining what documents are and how they are used and is transforming the author-reader relationship. Documents are changing from static artifacts produced by a few people for consumption by many people, to dynamic, interactive artifacts that can be produced and used by the same group of people (Brown and Duguid, 1996, quoted in Sturgill & Martin, 1999).

These documents are presented in a linked fashion, which allows for different ways of navigating through them. This invites the reader to take responsibility for the way in which they structure and organise the text. However, I've already mentioned that this may also lead to incoherence and superficiality, as readers skim from link to link, rather than really engage.

There are however ways to focus attention on the document, and in turn, to use the document to focus a discussion. Firstly, the text can be presented within a relatively closed space, for example, a departmental or course web-site, with only selected links to other web-sites. Secondly, in an annotated text, the links will be to the annotations (primarily but not exclusively: this depends on how much open-endedness is wanted). Thirdly, there are different ways of handling the annotations. One way of presenting on-line documents is to embed the document in an online environment with annotations by the teacher alone. This is a way of presenting a reading-guide to students. Annotations of different types can be included (and how many or how complete they are will depend on how much text is presented): for example, a glossary of terms and definitions; questions or comments relating to specific sentences; analyses of whole paragraphs or sections, for example, reconstructing arguments; comparisons and links to other sections of the text, or to other philosophical documents, and directing students to other resources, ranging from online lectures or lecture outlines, to the whole Web.

Hypertext consists of linked texts, whereas hypermediated text consists of text and other media. A very good example of a philosophy hypermediated text for pedagogical purposes is one which (until recently) presented Plato's *Apology*.<sup>34</sup> The text is web-based and consists not only of annotations, but of a range of facilities, embedded within a wider educational framework, incorporating email and discussion facilities, syllabi, handouts, paper topics, presentation slides and assignments. As the designers of the site, Craig Bach and Mark Manion point out, the user interface is often 'one of the least developed aspects of most web-based philosophical works' (2001:50), leading to an impoverished and unsatisfactory online reading experience. On this site, the interface is uncluttered and functional, driven by the constructivist-collaborativist pedagogical principles described earlier in this study, rather than by the technology itself. One of the best features of this site is its division into two different reading levels, the first of which provides links to definitions of terms as the cursor moves over unfamiliar terms in the text, as well as an overview of the structure of the text; the second of which provides analyses of passages (in effect, showing students how philosophical analyses are done), and further questions. Thus students

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<sup>34</sup> The site was hosted by Drexel University (<http://www.drexel.edu>), however, at the time of publication it is unavailable. Check the university for information. The features of the site are explained and outlined in Bach & Manion (2001).

are both presented with exemplary reading practices, on which they can then model their own independent reading practices, and encouraged to read in a dynamic and interactive way.

It is also a useful feature of such sites that they can embed texts within the history of philosophy, by linking the texts to appropriate history sites, as well as to other texts and documents to which they can be compared and contrasted, thus making students more aware of the tradition which forms the background of the texts they read. This would be a very useful supplement to the predominantly analytical training that UK philosophy students get, and would constitute at least a beginning of greater historical awareness.

The *Apology* site is unidirectional in that it allows the designer the site—the teacher—to make annotations, but not the student. This in itself can be a very useful teaching aid, particular for texts that are repeatedly used for teaching. It can also be done in a less high-tech way than in the *Apology* site, by using a simple annotation or commentary tool. This way of presenting texts is however better suited for short texts, or extracts (except possibly for the very dedicated!) as making the annotations is labour-intensive. One would also want to choose texts that one knows will be made good use of, by oneself and others. There is scope, here, for teachers of philosophy to contribute to a repository of annotated texts to be used for teaching purposes.

Document-centred discussions are different, as the annotations are made by the participants in the discussion, rather than by the teacher, or the teacher alone. Indeed, the most effective way of using them may be having part of a text annotated by the teacher in order to provide a model of philosophical reading practices, and another part to be annotated by discussants. In an ideal case, interactivity would be built into the kind of site developed by Bach and Manion (and indeed the site is now being developed in order to allow for this), so that it can be used as the basis of document-centred discussion.

Document-centred discussion develops all the same skills as online discussions, but has the further advantage of providing a natural focus for the discussion. It also keeps students focused on a piece of exemplary philosophical writing (though texts do have to be carefully chosen), which will be a springboard for their own writing and text-based discussion.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, it should also serve to develop students' interpretational skills, as they are forced to consider different

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<sup>35</sup> In fact, it will be interesting to see what effect, if any, this has on the tone and register of discussion.

interpretations to their own in the face of which they need to either modify or justify their own. In this way, they are also trained in basic interpretational methods, and in learning what such justification consists in. This in itself is an important practice of philosophy. Indeed, reading, writing and interpreting philosophical texts are all ways of doing philosophy, or are all practices of philosophy which are combined in document-centred discussion. In such discussions, students get feedback on an aspect of their practice which is normally hidden, or carried out in private study time.<sup>36</sup>

Annotation tools normally split the page between the document and discussion, creating a frame for each, with links between them, so that clicking on a link in the document frame (an icon, an outline or an embedded link indicated by a different colour font) takes one to the associated comment or annotation in the discussion frame. Some annotation tools create a link from the document to annotations which open in a new window or from discussions to document (CoNote).<sup>37</sup> However, it seems that coherence between document and discussion is maintained better by having a split page.

One of the most important issues when considering annotation tools is the level at which they allow for annotation to occur. Microsoft Word, for example, allows comments to be associated with blocks of text of any length—from a single character, to a whole paragraph, or more. Annotation tools differ as to the granularity that they support. For example, the tool used by the *Journal for Interactive Media in Education* (JIME) divides the document into sections, and comments and discussion are linked to whole sections. WebAnn (a Microsoft plug-in, described in Bernheim Brush et al 2002), and the Annotator tool developed at the University of Texas, as part of its Critical Tools suite of technological aids for teaching<sup>38</sup>, both allow for annotations linked with specific words and phrases. Below is the WebAnn interface:

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<sup>36</sup> See also Laurillard (2002:151-154) for a discussion of the way in which this document-centred discussion enhances teaching precisely because it allows for intrinsic feedback on practice rather than only on description of practice.

<sup>37</sup> See Bernheim Brush et al (2002) for more on some of the available annotation tools.

<sup>38</sup> At <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~criticaltools>. The tools are free downloads, but require a UNIX server.

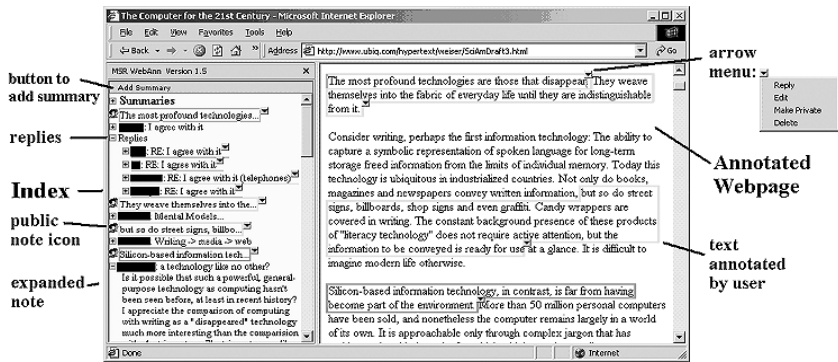


Figure 1: WebAnn interface embedded in Internet Explorer. On the right is the webpage being annotated, on the left is the index of notes and replies. Student names are blacked out to provide anonymity.

On this interface, each participant is associated with a different colour, with which they outline the part of the text that they have commented upon. This is perhaps not the best way of achieving this, as has been noted by the designers, who are considering using lines in the margin, or some other means of indicating which parts of the document have been annotated. Another tool which similarly allows for fine granularity (up to line level) is that used by the Pragglejazz group for metaphor studies.<sup>39</sup> On this site—which is devoted to poetry, and so appears in a line by line format—text that has been annotated is indicated by a small triangle, and all discussion relating to it appears below the line, when the ‘show comments’ option is used. This is an especially clear way of embedding discussion into text, although it may be particularly suited to poetry.

These differences of granularity have an impact on discussion. Although sometimes the possibility of making highly specific comments is useful, it can also lead to the discussion being too fragmentary. This is also in line with the nature of interpretation, which requires shifting focus between detail and overall structure. The JIME interface allows for commentary on each section of the document, as well as general commentary on the whole document. Dividing the document into sections also makes it more easily readable online. One of the standard difficulties with presenting text online is that, at least thus far, it seems that readers do prefer hard copy. Even in the case of the *Apology*

<sup>39</sup> Described by Schoonenboom (2002), and viewable at: <http://www.let.vu.nl/groups/pragglejazz.nsf/Round%201?OpenFrameset>

hypermediated texts, students had a tendency to print out the text rather than to read it online, reserving this only for access to annotations and other links. And similarly, in the study conducted by designers of the WebAnn system, students tended to print out the document, comment on the hard copy, and then transfer their annotations to the web-site. This in itself is not a severe impediment, so long as discussions remain anchored in the document; however it is time-consuming and seems to obviate many of the benefits of interactive reading which supposedly come with hypertext. It seems to me that it is a good idea not to place large tracts of text on the web-site, but rather shorter, quite dense or key, extracts, which are read on-line as well as in hard copy. This should also be better for keeping the discussion more focused, both with respect to subject matter, and time. This is particularly the case for undergraduate students; graduate students would probably gain more from having articles or chapters as the focus of discussion. In this case, however, the document should be divided into sections, possibly following the '3 click' rule: that is, no page should take longer than 3 clicks to scroll from beginning to end.

A further problem with the annotation software that is needed for interactive shared annotations is that it may not run on students' home computers, but only on appropriately configured campus computers. Access then becomes more difficult, and may curtail discussion.

## 6.1 Document-centred discussion: some guidelines

As with student-led discussion, document-centred discussion requires structure and organisation. Moderation remains pivotal to the success of the discussion. This could be done on the student-led model discussed above, although it is likely to present the discussion leader with quite a challenge. If student-leadership—that is, by students who are at the same level of study as participants—is opted for, this should occur within a well-supported environment, in which the teacher provides the broader framework, possibly annotates some of the text him- or herself, or provides leading questions to initiate discussion. In the absence of such support from the teacher, this is possibly a good discussion model into which to introduce leadership of undergraduates by graduates or other teaching assistants, if the instructor cannot do it him- or herself. Philosophical texts are dense, and there are often several different and sometimes competing interpretations, between which it will not be obvious which are better or more plausible, and on what grounds. These

texts cannot be isolated from their broader context, and so need a person with some knowledge of the context to guide the interpretations of others. But for the same reason, they are ideal for real collaborations, as they provide plenty of scope for negotiation.

In the case of an annotation tool that supports different levels of annotation, from specific words, phrases or lines to paragraphs or sections, leading questions can be as specific or as general as is desired; a range of questions is preferable, getting students to switch focus between detail and broader structural features. The questions can be divided into exegetical questions ('What is meant by x?', 'Is this an argument?' 'What view is being targeted here?') and evaluative questions ('Is this feasible?'). Leading questions are the start of a discussion thread; however it is important not to proliferate threads excessively for the reasons discussed above. It is also important that each thread does not develop in isolation from the others, since the aim is to help students come to an interpretation of the document as a whole. Here, the role of the discussion leader (student or other) is very important, for example, in weaving the different threads together, and in providing summaries.

Document-centred discussions seem to be particularly good as a supplement to face-to-face seminars, as they will ensure that students have thought about the document to be discussed, and considered others' interpretations as well as some of the questions raised by their own. In addition, the face-to-face seminar provides a natural way of summarising and bringing a form of closure to the on-line discussion, which in the case of a document, may be more challenging for students than issue or topic based discussions. Again, this depends on the level of the student, graduate students probably coping better with this type of discussion purely online.

### **Some further factors to be considered**

Teachers need to decide whether participation in an online discussion is to be compulsory. This seems to negate the reasons for using these resources based on their allegedly non-authoritarian character. In an ideal situation, coercion would not be required, but in the real world of higher learning, it is unfortunately true that students often need to be compelled to do what is good for them. This does not solve all participation problems, since only some minimal or moderate level of participation can be made compulsory, but it does go some way to solving them. If participation is compulsory, teachers will need to consider on what basis: that is, will it be part of students' attendance requirements (if these are

already an aspect of the institutional or departmental system) or of assessment.

If the second, then teachers will need to decide on the basis of assessment. An advantage of text-based communication is that the discussion is readily available to teachers for assessment. However, there are several assessment issues that must be addressed. Because these are collaborative discussions, it is not simply up to individuals how good their own contributions will be, as in part this will depend on the dialogue itself. The collaborative nature of these discussions results in a shared object—as discussed in section 3.2—which may have many pedagogical advantages, but does not make individual assessment easy. Group assessment, on the other hand, ignores the possibly unequal input of individuals, and can lead to tensions within groups. A combination of group and individual assessment may be the answer here, a mark being allocated for the overall discussion, and another for individual input, and then combining the two on a 50/50 basis, or some similar formula. Such a combined mark means that students need to be sufficiently committed to the group to ensure an overall good discussion, while providing them with the security that they will not be penalised excessively for others' under-performance, and at the same time, making them responsible for their own performance.

In addition, teachers need to decide how much should be made explicit to students at the outset of discussions. For example, normally netiquette rules are posted onto the discussion site: what should they contain, and what, if any, will be the consequences for not adhering to them? These rules are by now quite standard (no obscenities, no discriminatory remarks, capitals indicate shouting and shouldn't be used, etc.) but in fact, there is more of a tendency for participants to be too polite on discussions than not. However, teachers may want to list some discussion strategies, such as acknowledging and engaging with other participants' messages, not writing overly long messages (perhaps an average length should be stipulated); as well as with some philosophical strategies (perhaps an outline of some basic critical reasoning skills). However, generally it is a good idea to say only what must be said, and not to over-specify things in advance.

The following is a check-list of some of the decisions that must be made by tutors who wish to use student-led discussion:

- a) What kind of discussion model to use (some possibilities were outlined in section 5): in particular, will roles be pre-assigned, if so, which, what role will the discussion leader have, how many of the moderating



- functions will the discussion leader carry out, how many leaders and for which functions?
- b) How many students to a group, and how or by whom will membership in the groups be decided?
  - c) What kind of assignment will be set for the discussion: what topic or question?
  - d) How will the discussion be related to the rest of the course: will it be a stand-alone discussion or will it supplement face-to-face discussions. If so, how.
  - e) How much will be made explicit on the discussion site: for example, netiquette rules (and what will they include), some basic discussion strategies, some basic philosophical strategies.
  - f) Who may start a new thread, and under what conditions (for example, only after conferring with the discussion leader?)
  - g) What will be the time frame for the discussion? At what point does the discussion or parts of the discussion become read only?
  - h) How will the discussion be embedded into the course web site, if there is one?
  - i) Will participation in the discussion be compulsory? If so, how many postings will be compulsory?
  - j) Will participation be assessed? How will assessment fit in with other assessment strategies used in the course?

A document-centred discussion requires much the same range of decisions, but also requires more initial work from the tutor, in particular in terms of choosing the text or extract to be discussed, deciding on how much commentary or guidance (if any) to include, and deciding on the initial questions to start off discussion threads. It also requires technological assistance, especially as, at this point, interactive annotation software is not a standard feature of VLEs, and must be imported as a plug-in, and the appropriate system configuration installed.

## Conclusion

There is much evidence to indicate that on-line technologies serve the purposes of sound educational principles, allowing opportunities for active, responsible learning, for developing higher-level cognitive skills, and for students to enter into the discursive domain of the discipline they are studying. On-line technologies do not only extend resources that are already available to teachers, providing more possibilities for collaboration and interaction; rather, they do so in a highly specific way, due in particular to the text-based nature of the medium, and the oral-

written discourse which is characteristic of it. These aspects of on-line technologies are particularly appropriate for fostering skills of analysis, argument and interpretation, and so should be of especial interest to teachers of philosophy. Using these technologies effectively will at first be an onerous task; I hope to have laid out some of the reasons why it is worth doing so.

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Project Report:

Assessment where there is no right or wrong answer

## **An Analysis of the use of Oral Presentations within the Religious and Philosophical Subject Area at the University of Derby 1996-2002**

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**Eleanor Jackson and Philip Henry**

*University of Derby*

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### 1.1 Introduction: The Problem

The problem which this paper endeavours to address can be briefly stated as follows: how can oral presentations be best understood as an effective means of assessment in cases where there is no right or wrong answer?

While the use of ‘viva voce’ examinations to determine the grade of a borderline undergraduate student or the merit of a doctoral thesis is an accepted part of the traditional academic assessment process, the same is not true for the use of oral presentations as an integral part of coursework assessment. This use appears to be haphazard, or at best problematic, and little research has been done into the effects of sustained use of this method of assessment, whether in Religious Studies and Theology departments or any other subject area, as we will show. Further, although it can be argued that familiarity with the skills involved in producing undergraduate presentations prepares students for present day job interview situations, we have not discovered any analysis of the relationship between these obvious ‘transferable skills’ and the undergraduate assessment process.<sup>1</sup> The University of Derby appears to

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘transferable skills’ we mean those generic competences, such as the ability to express oneself clearly and to answer questions orally well, which can later be utilised in a variety of contexts and not exclusively in academic discourse relating to matters of religion and philosophy. In the 1998 Definitive Document of Religions: Culture and Belief in the Combined Subjects Programme, assessment by presentation is said to involve ‘the selection of material appropriate to a short presentation, and the exploration and discussion of the significance of the material being reviewed. It provides evidence of clarity of thought, the ability to communicate with, and enthuse other students, and the ability to debate topic showing sensitivity to a wider variety of views.’

be no exception in this. Finally, although presentations as administered according to the University of Derby Combined Accumulated Modular System (CAMS) assessment criteria do not require direct presentation of an answer that is categorically right or wrong, the significance of this has not been analysed.<sup>2</sup> Yet this may prove to be the single most important aspect of the use of presentations, which illuminates the whole contentious issue.

This point can be illustrated by the fact that although much seems to have been written on the secondary problems of oral presentations, such as student group dynamics, oral communications, peer assessment and the appropriateness of summative or formative means of assessment, little has evidently been done to address this issue directly.<sup>3</sup> The exception is a brief qualitative study involving a literature search, a defining of terms and the problems of assessment by presentation, and then interviews with four theology students and four law students.<sup>4</sup> Certainly we are not aware of any study from within the context of Religious and Philosophical Studies. Even Sophie Gilliat-Ray, in her consideration of innovative teaching and learning methods does not ask whether material so imaginatively delivered should not also result in students been assessed by equally imaginative methods.<sup>5</sup> This leads to a further question concerning whether the content as well as the style of teaching in taught modules should influence the method of assessment, but to answer this question is beyond the scope of this article.

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<sup>2</sup> These criteria are: (a) quality of expression, (b) sharpness of focus, (c) identification of central issues, (d) awareness of significant evidence, (e) clarity and succinctness of overview, (f) internalised understanding of critical issues, (g) structural logic, (h) critical engagement with the material.

<sup>3</sup> For example in the otherwise admirable *Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*, edited by Heather Fry, Steve Ketteridge and Stephanie Marshall, London 2000. See also George, J & Cowan, J *A Handbook of Techniques for Formative Evaluation: Mapping the student's learning experience*. London (1999). For other web based articles see bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> All that really emerges from this study is that these particular students are highly articulate and committed to their chosen subject. Joughi, G. 'Dimensions of Oral Assessment and Student Approaches to Learning', in Brown, S and Glasner, G (1999) *Assessment Matters in Higher Education*. OU p.146f.

<sup>5</sup> Sophie Gilliat-Ray, 'Breaking Down the Classroom Walls: Innovative Teaching and Learning Methods in Religious Studies and Theology' in *PRS-LTSN Journal* Vol. 2 no 2 Winter 2003, pp.200-10.

## 1.2 Background and Aims

The purpose of the study initially was to relate the theoretical study of the implications of the generic use of presentations as a means of assessment as found in the writings of educational theorists with the actual practice of presentations as a means of assessment where there is no right or wrong answer within the Religious and Philosophical Studies subject area. We had anecdotal evidence of lecturers in other subject areas abandoning the practice because of the difficulties encountered, difficulties which we will discuss in our conclusion both from the module leaders' viewpoints and the students' perspectives. By academic custom rather than from any educational theory, peer assessment of presentations was dropped in 1995/96 and sometimes hostile group dynamics discouraged its re-introduction. This problem is discussed by Phil Race (2001) in an analysis of the impact of presentations on Physical Science students, as one of the disadvantages of the system. In addition there is the traumatic effect of the experience on some students, the transient nature of the assessment if proceedings are not properly recorded and the lack of anonymity in marking which may highlight problems of eliminating subjective bias. Against this he sets the notion that the communication skills involved in '... giving good presentations are much more relevant to professional competences needed in the world of work.' This includes the ability to present research material at future conferences, to develop interview skills and to work collaboratively.<sup>6</sup> We also felt that there were great benefits in the system, and together with our former colleagues Professor Richard King and Dr Balbinder Bhogal wished to relate educational theory and critical reflection on our professional practice 1996-2002.

This point is reinforced by this typically somewhat negative comment:

Oral or *viva voce* examinations, though commonly used in professional and postgraduate assessment, are the subject of great concern to test developers and psychometricians. They have their attractions, but are subject to all the well-known biases and problems of selection interviews, and should only be used in the full knowledge of these problems and how

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<sup>6</sup> Race, P, 2001, 'Designing Assessment to Improve Physical Sciences' pp.31-2 in his *LTSN Physical Science Practice Guide*.

their effects may be minimised. The new practitioner in higher education is counselled to beware of and avoid orals ...<sup>7</sup>

Clearly the successful use of presentations depends largely on the assessor's confidence in the system and their own abilities to administer it, something which may be grounded in their personality type rather than their theoretical knowledge. This may account for the fact that all philosophy and theology modules were and are assessed by examination and coursework and never by presentation. There is no logical reason why presentations should not be used. However according to the University of Derby academic regulations the mode of assessment must be balanced, all students should undertake a third of their assessment by examination and coursework, a third coursework only, and a third of modules with presentations. Assessment of coursework is weighted in such a way that the presentation mark never comprises more than 30% of the total module grade.<sup>8</sup>

After considerable discussion with colleagues, we defined the project aims as follows:

- To examine the presentation method of assessment in order to demonstrate how it functions as 'assessment where there is no right or wrong answer' compared with other forms of assessment.
- To identify the factors which might influence the results of the study, such as the students' perceptions of the purpose of this type of assessment, their desire for a means of assessment which would confer useful transferable skills, and their awareness that there was no right or wrong answer.<sup>9</sup>
- Having discovered that students generally receive higher grades for modules assessed by oral presentations, to establish whether or not this is due to the high proportions who are women, mature students or members of ethnic minorities being empowered by oral assessment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wakeford, R, 'Principles of Assessment' in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S & Marshall, S (eds.) (2000) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, London.

<sup>8</sup> See University of Derby CAMS Guide for Academic and Administrative Staff 1999/2000 pp.7-21

<sup>9</sup> Programme handbooks for Religions: Culture and Belief students also draw their attention to the fact that there is no right or wrong way of actually doing a presentation. Blackboard and chalk may be as good as PowerPoint in a presentation.

<sup>10</sup> On examination of the assessment profiles presented to the Combined Subjects Programme Assessment Board, 1997-2002, it seems to be almost universally the case



- To investigate the element of ‘equal opportunities’ so that we can determine whether assessment where there is no right or wrong answer is a means of enabling students with disabilities, dyslexia or difficulties due to ethnicity or social class to realise their full potential.<sup>11</sup>
- Conversely, to discuss more problematic aspects of presentations at the University of Derby, such as the requirement of group work and the hybrid nature of the assessment as containing elements which are both formative and summative.<sup>12</sup>
- To initiate consideration of the question whether the subject matter of the presentations conditions the assessment outcomes.

Although the study is embedded in practice at the University of Derby, we believe it has wider implications concerning the administration of oral presentations as a means of assessment. We also believe that although the use of presentations as a means of assessment where there is no right or wrong answer could be upheld as an example of ‘best practice’ professionally, there are aspects which could have been done better. This study is therefore a critical reflection on the system of oral presentations. We can also demonstrate that this assessment process meets the criteria laid down by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). It locates assessment within the teaching and learning process in terms of the transparency of the process, promoting learning, measuring the attainment of learning outcomes, appropriateness to the student

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that students perform better in modules where assessment is by coursework only, and examinations deflate their marks.

<sup>11</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate fully the question of social class. The University of Derby is reported to receive special funding in recognition of its having 85-90% of its students from working class backgrounds or drawn from inner city areas. One question in the questionnaire probes this by asking about regional accents. At Graduation 2001 in response to the Chancellor’s question, practically all graduates present indicated that they were the first in their family to have a graduate education.

<sup>12</sup> Among the criteria for assessment is evidence of the ability to work as a team (formative). Failure to do so almost invariably produces a poor final submission (summative). An excellent discussion of the distinction between formative and summative methods of assessment can be found in Light, G and Cox R (2001) *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. London p.169f.

profile, level and mode of study, consistency and rigour of marking and proper internal and external moderation.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.1 Methodology: Reflective Practitioners

Essentially our inspiration and our methodology is that of the reflective practitioner, an approach which it was gratifying to find is supported by Light and Cox (2001), and perhaps more significantly, to find that their recommendations concerning the use of role play and group work in assessment largely coincided with our existing practices. They do not discuss presentations!<sup>14</sup> ‘Practitioner’ is an appropriate term with which to embrace both a Senior Lecturer who organises presentations as a means of assessment and a research student who in his undergraduate days (1998-2001) experienced the full range of presentations in Religions: Culture and Belief.

The former first became interested in the role of presentations in the teaching and learning process when she was an Assistant Teacher in Religious Education at a large Birmingham Comprehensive School, (1970-71). About a third of the 11-14 year olds were not literate. Many had behavioural problems and probably undiagnosed dyslexia. Asking them to draw the answer created further problems for them, but role-play, performing sketches, singing, and even acting in a passion play transformed so many of them that it was clear oral work was of great strategic importance. Six years spent in theological education and ministerial formation in India (1979-86), in a culture where literacy had until recently been the preserve of the elite socio-religious groups, provided evidence of how oral presentations embedded in popular culture could empower students, especially those from non-professional backgrounds. They passed rigorous competitive examinations derived from a University of London pattern<sup>15</sup>, by soul-destroying ‘swotting’ and learning by rote, but oral work gave them opportunities for flair and imagination in exegesis and problem-solving as well as exposing them to peer assessment. Nevertheless a few women students may have been less

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<sup>13</sup> QAA 1997 as quoted by Richard Wakeford, ‘Principles of Assessment’, in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall S (2000) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. London p.59.

<sup>14</sup> Light, G and Cox, R (2001) *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The Reflective Professional*. London, ch. 4 & 10.

<sup>15</sup> Lindsay, A (1932) *Christian Higher Education in India*. Ranson, C, (1945) *The Christian Minister in India, His Vocation and Training* describes the pressures on theological colleges which are unresolved to this day despite the greater emphasis on contextualisation and liberation theology.

participatory because they found it difficult to speak spontaneously in front of men<sup>16</sup>.

In contrast, when I was lecturing at the University of Göttingen, (student theological education in Germany 1982-3), the students' work involved summative assessment after six years' university education, including study of three classical languages. Likewise taking thirteen examinations in one week (June 1970) as summative assessment after two years' lectures and tutorials took a terrible toll on me.

Confronted with the system prevailing at the University of Derby in 1996, it seemed to me to be appropriate to develop it using the positive elements from my past experience to refine the use of presentations as a means of assessment where there is no right or wrong answer. This was my contribution to the revalidations of 1998 and 2000, in module reports and annual programme reports I began to monitor how successful presentations can improve students' self-confidence and self-esteem while improving their social skills in group work<sup>17</sup>, and encourage the diffident and dyslexic, as in Birmingham. I aimed to encourage students to be imaginative and creative in their presentations, if they wished, which led one colleague to comment that these games were all very well for future primary school teachers, but was not for future academics. I tried to give clear and precise instructions about the conduct and content of oral presentations and to do all I could to encourage mutual student support.<sup>18</sup> This experience fuelled the desire to find out whether presentations as a means of assessment really do empower marginalised students, as anecdotal evidence gleaned over six

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<sup>16</sup> Readers will be aware of the many UK studies on the dominance of males in mixed seminar groups. See case studies in George, J & Cowan, J (1999) p.41.

<sup>17</sup> Students at Derby begin at Level 4 by giving a 5-8 minute talk on a visit to a place of worship and answer questions from their peers, then may opt to take modules with group presentations of 20-30 minutes and finally at Level 6 produce presentations based on group research projects. A detailed explanation of aims and procedures is given in the Religious Studies programme handbooks.

<sup>18</sup> The progress of several students has been traced through the modules with presentations. Two standard entry 18 year old females were typical in that they arrived intensely shy and soft spoken, but by doing group presentations with a partner or partners have vastly improved and feel much better about themselves. One is seriously overweight and the other acutely dyslexic with the attendant problems of self-organisation. Lees, S (1986) *Losing Out*. London. The strategies discussed in Light and Cox (2001) *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: the Reflective Practitioner* pp.119-123 can be recognised in our practices.

years as a programme leader suggested.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore to me a matter of some disquiet that in the QAA Code of Practice for Students with Disabilities, in a section headed by the statement, ‘presentations are viewed as an appropriate alternative when a student is unable to take the normal means of assessment, an examination’.<sup>20</sup> At the University of Derby presentations are a required mode of assessment for all students. Consequently in the reverse situation on two occasions I had to invoke the regulations for an alternative to presentations for two students with severe speech impediments.

## 2.2 Personal Perspectives: Assessed Practitioner

As co-author of this project I (Henry) bring to it two clearly definable views. Firstly as a former Combined Subject Programme (CSP) undergraduate within the Religious and Philosophical subject area at the University of Derby, I offer a personal reflexive account of assessment methods. Secondly as a current sessional lecturer and doctoral student within the subject I provide technological and methodological support for the project (delineated below) together with Dr Jackson.

My personal background to this research project is based initially in my former undergraduate studies in the CSP, which I undertook between 1998 and 2001. I came to the University as a mature student aged thirty-seven from a background in the public sector. I had personal experience of assessment methods in public service, designated as examination related assessment criteria, and practical assessment in role-play models where the criteria were based around the development of personal interactive transferable skills towards vocational training. I was a former instructor in the latter and part of the development team for ongoing training.

As an undergraduate I completed twelve modules in ‘Religions Culture and Belief’ (at level five and six), and these included a total of five modules with presentation assessment as part of the assessment rationale. Of the five, two were basic fieldwork modules and a third an

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that dyslexia is not a disease of the English middle classes, a preferred label for the 1950s ‘word-blindness’, but a disability probably caused by neurological problems processing visual information, and it occurs as a phenomenon throughout Asia. Many of our students had their problems blamed on their lack of English—which their dyslexia made difficult for them to acquire.

<sup>20</sup> October 1999, ‘Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in education’, p15. Standards are laid down which one would think were the rightful expectation of all students, not just the disabled—e.g. that procedures are applied consistently across the institution.

advanced fieldwork module. The remaining two were in 'Hindu and Jain Ways of Salvation' and 'New Religious Movements'.<sup>21</sup> All of these were subject, in part, to assessment by presentation both individually (two cases) and as a group (three cases).<sup>22</sup>

The modules taken during my undergraduate programme were influenced by a number of factors. As a mature student I felt a sense of self-consciousness at an academic level that I had not encountered for some years. It became apparent quite quickly that in order to complete the degree with the least possible stress I needed to plan a route that helped to cushion me from exposure to examinations. The rationale for this decision was based on a pre-conditioning to examinations in the nineteen seventies at both secondary and advanced level. These experiences reinforced feelings of insecurity in my ability (despite reasonable results), which helped to highlight an anathema for this assessment method. With one exception it was in fact in excess of twenty years since I had taken formal academic examinations and I was not prepared to risk the experience when alternative methods of assessment were available. This strategy did not however protect me entirely as I did take two examinations during the degree, at no major cost to my grades.

### 2.3 A Profile of a Typical Student?

I am, according to the QAA Subject Review Report of April 2001,<sup>23</sup> typical of the student profile as described in the University's commitment to widening access to include those from diverse backgrounds (2000 /2001), " ... [where] 72 per cent are mature students."<sup>24</sup> My acceptance of coursework by way of written assignment

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<sup>21</sup> The following level 5 modules carried presentations: *Indian Religious Traditions 1/ Hindu and Jain Ways of Salvation 1996 -2002: Indian Religious Traditions2/ 1996-1998: Cross Cultural Field Experience 1&2/ 1999-2002: Christian Encounters with African and Afro-Caribbean Religious Experience/ 1998-2000: Revalidated for level 6 2001/ 2002: Zoroastrianism 2002: Level 6 Modules: New Religious Movements/ 1996-2000: Inter-Religious Dialogue/ 1996-2002: Advanced Fieldwork2000. Students have to pass a total of 16 modules across level 5 and 6 to graduate with honours*

<sup>22</sup> To obtain the requisite number of credits, students have to pass eight modules at each level, including the double module for coursework, *Independent Studies*. They usually take nine.

<sup>23</sup> QAA Subject Review Report, April 2001, Q353/2001. University of Derby Theology and Religious Studies, p6.

<sup>24</sup> A University of Derby leaflet printed in 2000 gives 40% as the level of mature students, but this has changed dramatically with the ending of grants and the increase in fees since 1998. Only 2 out of 9 students beginning the same pathway in 2001 were over 25.

and presentation in both individual seminar and group environments was fundamental to the decision making process when selecting modules. My experience of individual and group presentations outlined the need to take them seriously as a means to work in collaboration with my peers. It also identified the need to have a sound knowledge of the area presented in individual oral examination post presentation. Here I saw a definite advantage in interview and other oral examination situations for the future.

As a reflective researcher for this project I am in danger of succumbing to the insider-outsider research dilemma. However, as a case study in point, I have a valid, if somewhat unorthodox position from which to span the insider-outsider divide. As a former undergraduate with a contribution to make reflexively, I am also subject to the conditioning of the results of the findings described in this study. I make this statement early in my personal assessment of my own experience, as it is fair to say that to the best of my ability I have tried to offer only my personal reflections of the undergraduate experience, bracketing out (as best I can) peer experiences and related feedback. As Hufford<sup>25</sup> points out, “... reflexivity in knowledge-making involves bringing the subject, ‘doer’ of the knowledge-making activity, back into the account of knowledge.” This sums up my position insofar as scholarship is an object of scholars, done by them, to them. The fact that all observations are made from somewhere supports the notion that “... all knowing is subjective.” This is an issue Hufford makes clear in his discussion of reflexivity, in what he calls Belief Studies. I am aware of my awareness and reflect on that despite issues surrounding the research process that may colour my perceptions. The honesty of the endeavour is in an attempt to create reflexivity that is not mere self-justification but transcends that in search of a culturally specific human quality of knowledge, something which applies to both of us.

I devised a strategy for my degree programme that took into account the issues of presentations as a different medium of assessment to exams, the rationale being the useful outcome of presentations in developing communications skills and competence in interview and conference situations. In this I was not disappointed. My long-term aim was to find a career in academia and this was a sensible way (*pave Race*) to test my communications skills.

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<sup>25</sup> Hufford D J 1999, ‘The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies’ in McCuthcheon R T, *The Insider/ Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, pp.294-5.

## 2.4 Further Methodological Considerations

The methodology adopted by us in this project therefore can be summarised as follows: firstly, we are 'reflective practitioners', either as an assessor or one of the assessed, and although we are only reviewing six years' practice, we bring to bear on the subject insights from much longer experience. The question is, to what extent can one ever completely 'bracket out' one's subjective impressions? Feminist academics argue that 'objective information' is a Cartesian illusion, since no comprehension of facts, no selection of them to comprise history and no presentation thereof is ever objective or 'academic' in the Oxbridge sense.<sup>26</sup>

We are therefore unapologetic about our advocacy of presentations, and we have heeded the comment of the External Examiner concerning the first presentations based on field experience in South India and do not penalise advocacy in students.

'The genre emerging as a result of the experience was distinctive. With feminist philosophers attempting to persuade the academy that personal reflections are part of academic analysis, I would be less inclined to be too critical of those who bubbled over with enthusiasm.'<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, we have taken note of the 'insider/outsider' debate, and we are writing about a system of assessment of which we have inside knowledge and experience, endeavouring to stand back and reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, in order that an 'outsider' can understand it. To overcome the issue of bias here we designed a questionnaire in order to obtain "objective" quantifiable data. However the 120 past and present students of the University of Derby who were sent a questionnaire about presentations are all 'insiders'. The 63 who responded were among those who had left a forwarding address with their programme leader when they graduated, or had subsequently asked for a reference or help in time of trouble. Quite a number of the students enclosed a letter of thanks for past help or sympathy concerning the impending closure of the subject area. These letters were swiftly removed so that the purpose of an anonymous response was not undermined.

We note that the limitations of the sampling process were further affected by the vagaries of the post. Even allowing for a percentage

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<sup>26</sup> Hampson, D (1991) *Theology and Feminism*, London; Hampson, D, ed, 1996, *Swallowing a Fishbone*, SPCK, London.

<sup>27</sup> Professor Ian Markham, External Examiner's Report received 16 July 1999.

going astray, an appreciable proportion of former students appropriated the stamped addressed envelope for the reply. Telephoning a sample 10% of the students to ask if they had replied of course produced affirmative answers.

Since their memories might have dimmed even over the passage of a few years, their answers have been co-related with the anonymous questionnaires that students fill in and submit to their module or cohort representative on the programme committee. Unfortunately, the efficiency of this system varies enormously. Some diligent student representatives obtain 90-100% responses; others barely get 40% and relate oral complaints instead. We do not know if the 63 respondents also put in module questionnaires, though as not a few were module representatives, the presumption is that they did. Unfortunately the module questionnaire is generic to all modules and does not specifically enquire about presentations, only about whether students understood the Learning Outcomes. There is space for comment but this was never used to comment on presentations, but rather on a perceived chronic lack of resources or books, or absentee collaborators, or academic overload, which are factors in the preparation of presentations, as we will explain in our concluding overview. Specific letters of complaint have been received twice, once (February 1999) with regard to a module administered by two part-time lecturers who failed to ensure consistency and continuity, once (March 2002) by a student who complained that he had not been assessed by peer review. He also objected to the Jackson principle that as all students watch the presentations, no two groups in any given module may do presentations on the same subject as each other.

An element of outsider control and objectivity is provided by the rigorous system of internal moderation, with all presentations being recorded on videotape, and then in the case of group presentations, viewed by both the first and second markers before being sent to the external examiner together with feedback sheets and any accompanying handouts the students prepared. Until 1999 a short written submission was also required, and some groups submitted scripts, which it must be confessed were useful indications of who had prepared what, especially on the one and only occasion when a tape was mislaid, but which were never marked as such.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The tape proved invaluable when a student 'giving a lecture' in a *New Religious Movements* made a formal complaint that another student had ruined things for him by releasing a child's toy across the table. The tape substantiated her explanation that she



Thirdly, the project is ‘consumer orientated’ It focuses on students’ perceptions of themselves, their achievements, and what presentations were to them in terms of acquiring transferable skills, and so on. We also wanted to know whether students deliberately opt for presentations, following a cryptic statement in an Annual Report ‘There is also some concern that unless there is a fair balance between varying modes of assessment, some students will seek to avoid examinations even though such modules may not be appropriate for future career paths.’<sup>29</sup>

The questionnaires, which are reviewed below, were designed to elicit basic information about the student’s academic achievements, their personal identity, and their self perception with regard to ethnicity and disability. We also wanted to know why they chose a module with presentations and whether they were aware that the assessment criteria were predicated on there being ‘no right or wrong answer.’

Fourthly, in constructing our research model we used the principle of ‘triangulation’ as a means of verifying the data. The analysis of the questionnaires will be balanced by statistical analysis of final year assessment profiles in order to establish whether Religious Studies presentations as part of ‘coursework only’<sup>30</sup> enhance students’ marks. We also wish to check the percentage of students occupying ‘pathway changes’, because we have evidence of students transferring into Religious Studies and then taking on presentation assessed modules as a way of completing their degree, as presentations are perceived to be easier. A pathway change is usually made because of changed career plans necessitating different qualifications. However, it may indicate a ‘fail and terminate’ student. In recent years the Religious Studies department has become famous for turning round these students to success. We have taken the profiles of an equivalent number of students to the number responding, but as everything is anonymised, we cannot say in all cases that there is a profile to match the questionnaire’s finding. Also, since results are only kept for three years after a student graduates, I only have 1999-2001. We decided it was unethical to use 2002 results.

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accidentally yanked out her toddler’s clockwork mouse with a handkerchief and apart from laughter, disruption was minimal.

<sup>29</sup> Annual report: Social, Cultural and Religious Studies Programme, 1997-8.

<sup>30</sup> Assessment in each module is either by 100% coursework, or 50% coursework, 50% examination in the former, the number of written pieces submitted is variable, usually either 50% for each of two essays, or 30% presentation, 70% essay. All submissions have to meet Learning Outcomes. Presentations are never found in modules that are assessed by examination.

Additionally, a significant proportion of students had deferred coursework, and may not have graduated in 2002. The issue of progression is discussed, but Religious Studies students have a better progression rate than the Combined Subject Programme norm given here.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.1 Presentation as an Assessment Method: The Research Strategy

As outlined above the research methodology follows traditional lines in offering a framework not uncommon in social science research, where the research question is influenced by the purpose(s) for it and the supporting theory. In turn the questions influence the methods adopted and the sampling strategy.

The research strategy is fixed as essentially quantitative, being based on the breakdown and analysis of the figures attributed to the University of Derby's Combined Subject and Specialist Programmes taken from annual review and QAA figures, which are stand-alone documents with academic credibility. The use of these is in presenting an overview and student profile breakdown reflecting the sociological makeup of CSP at Derby, relative to gender, age, ethnicity and disability. The overview is an indicator of the background, when comparing these figures in terms of student population, against the sample to which a formal questionnaire was distributed (see appendix 1).

### 3.2 Background to the Research Sample

The sample to whom the questionnaire was distributed comprised one hundred and twenty students (120) accessible to the researchers as outlined above. The profile of the group canvassed comprises 88 CSP students (73.33%), 27 Specialist degree (SD) students (22.5%), and 5 Development Studies (DS) students (4.17%),<sup>32</sup> Of the surveyed sample 26 (21.6%), were male and 94 (78.33%), were female. There were 67 (55.83%), mature students of which 17 were male, and 50 female. Ethnic minorities numbered 33 (27.5%). Disabled students numbered 21 (17.5%) of whom 18 were female and 3 male. The number available is from a total potential population of undergraduates of four hundred and

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<sup>31</sup> See CSP Annual Programme Reports produced by Graham Parker 1996-2001 which I have compared with my Religions: Culture and belief Reports, quoted in the QAA Review April 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Religious Studies modules are an option equivalent to a minor pathway for (Third World) Development studies students who being in the School of Environmental and Applied Sciences were much more difficult to trace.

seventy eight (478) enrolled in Religious Studies between 1996 and 2002, in both the specialist degrees and CSP degree programmes. Reverting to the question of the success of students completing both CSP and Specialist degree, these high academic standards are highlighted by the external examiners, who identify the quality of degree results by non-standard entry, mature students and students with relatively low A level points score.<sup>33</sup> Between 1998 and 2001 18% of foundation/access students gained firsts, 54% upper seconds, 25% lower seconds, and 3% continue on the programme. Overall 62% of all students completing programmes find employment or go on to further study.

### 3.3 Combined Subject Programme: Statistical Indicators

Having briefly delineated the potential CSP and specialist degree population we will briefly reflect on the much larger total CSP population of which, Religious Studies (RS)<sup>34</sup> is only a part. This is however an interesting indicator by comparison with the smaller sample within RS at Derby. This snap shot is by way of orientation to the larger student background. Comparisons can be made between the macro and micro relative to gender, age, ethnicity and disability. Taking the annual report for 1999/2000 as a snap shot of CSP population, it acts as a reasonable indicator of the overall CSP provision from 1996. There are few important changes statistically. Total CSP numbers for 1999/2000 are 2118.<sup>35</sup> The average gender split across all three undergraduate stages (4, 5 and 6) is 63% female, 37% male. The ethnicity breakdown identifies white 75%, Afro-Caribbean 4%, Asian 13%, Chinese <1% and other 7%. This shows a slight increase in Black [all] +2%, Asian [all] +3%, since 1996. Disability figures reflect Dyslexia 3%, deaf/hearing 1%, blind/partial sight 1%, not listed/unspecified 5%, other disability 2%, giving a total disability figure of 12%. Age on entry reflects students under 21 at 72%, and those over 21 at 28% with <1% unknown. 83% of students completed or continued at level 6 compared with 86%, 88%

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<sup>33</sup> Statistics produced by the Guardian education Supplement, August 2001, showed the University of Derby religious Studies Department as 3/50 (Theology and Religious Studies) Universities for value-addedness. Derby scored the same rating (3/50) for employability of students.

<sup>34</sup> RS denotes Religious Studies students across all programmes. The name of the subject area was changed to Religious and Philosophical Studies (RPS) in August 2001

<sup>35</sup> This temporary down turn has been reversed as the 2001 figure shows 2780 CSP students

and 91% in the previous three years. This is identified in the table below, fig. 1. [over]

### Overall CSP Indicator % (1999-2000)

%Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Age
Male 37 Female 63	White 75 Afro-Caribbean 4 Asian 13 Chinese <1 Other 7	Dyslexia 3 Deaf 1 Blind/Partial 1 Unspecified 5 Other disability 2 Not disabled 88	<21 72 >21 28
<b>Total 100%</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 1**

The figures in the table above can be compared to the student entry profile for both BA/BSc Religions: Culture and Belief (CSP) and specialist BA degree students (SD) within the Religious and Philosophical Studies subject area. These figures are taken from the entry characteristics of students for 1999-2000 of the QAA Subject Review and show significant differences in the two populations.

### % RS Entry Characteristics (1999-2000)

Gender	CSP	SD	Ethnicity	CSP	SD
Male	28	29	White	73	72
Female	72	71	Asian	18	14
			Afro-Car	2	0
			Other	7	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Disability	CSP	SD	Age	CSP	SD
Dyslexia	7	3	<21	48	43
Deaf	0	0	>21	52	57
Blind/part	0	0			
Other	11	9			
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 2**

The comparison of both the larger total CSP population (fig. 1) and the smaller RS (CSP and SD, fig. 2), reflects proportionately higher levels in the smaller group (fig. 2) in ethnic minorities disabled and mature students. Ethnic minorities (fig. 2) are 27% CSP and 28% SD compared to the total CSP population (fig. 1) of 25%. Disabled students (fig. 1) are 12%, compared to 18% CSP and 12% SD (fig. 2). In terms of age,

students (fig. 1) are 72% under twenty-one and 28% over twenty-one whilst figure 2 shows 48% under twenty-one and 52% over twenty-one CSP and 43 and 57% respectively SD. This indicates 24% more mature students in (fig. 2) CSP and 29% more mature SD students, than the equivalent age difference reported in the larger population CSP (fig 1).

The snapshot of SD students in Religious and Philosophical Studies either in the BA (Hons) 'Religions, Social and Cultural Studies' or BA (Hons) in 'The Study of Religions' offers a less balanced picture than that of the larger CSP entry, simply because the specialist programme students are small in number and stand alone in the subject area. They do not form a micro part of a larger macro picture and cannot therefore be compared to larger indicators. Despite this it is important to have an overview of the student profile in the specialist degree area within RS at Derby, as a proportion of SD students are respondents to the questionnaire circulated, which is analysed later in this report. The figures in the specialist snapshot are also taken from the annual return of 1999-2000.

### 3.4 The Pilot Sample

The methodology describing the sample surveyed by means of a questionnaire is outlined above. Twelve questionnaires were administered as a pilot sample on 12 July 2002, when a number of the then second year students and most of the Derby graduates who are MA Religion in a Plural Society students participated in a day conference entitled Religion, State and Society in the Colonial Era. This was in order to test out the questions for suitability, rather than the answers, but as a discrete sample the results might have been influenced by the fact that at the end of the conference a senior student gave a solo presentation as required by the module she is taking, Advanced Field Experience (Jamaica 2002), and a number of the students were there to support her. The group was also not representative in that the interaction of religious traditions in India and Africa in the colonial and post-colonial periods is only one of the specialist interests of the Religious Studies subject area. Therefore the answers were subsumed into the total sent.

### 3.5 The Survey Sample

It is important to reflect here on the usefulness of the surveyed sample in relation to the wider CSP population as outlined. Clearly the sample surveyed was a non-probability sample, in that it was not carried out by either random or systematic sampling. This was not possible given the

researchers' inability to trace all members of the total population of CSP students within the Religious and Philosophical studies framework. The accessible sample became the one hundred and twenty former CSP and SD students who were traced from 1996 to 2001. The longitudinal time frame however only produced a sample from 1998 to 2001. The 'rule of thumb' for sample size proposed by Mertens (1998)<sup>36</sup> as fifteen participants per variable is satisfied within the context of the survey sample. The survey questionnaire is both descriptive and explanatory and seeks to clarify a valid relationship between attitude and behaviour of the participants involved. The nature of the survey sample leans towards 'purposive sampling' in that Dr Jackson's judgement in choice of participants is wholly based on typicality of interest of the participant. This is an issue discussed by Robson,<sup>37</sup> who claims, "... they tend to be used in situations where probability sampling would not be feasible." This can be seen to be the case where all the participants, as in this case, are of a particular type, i.e. CSP/SD students and former students all of whom have taken modules in Religious and Philosophical Studies. With this in mind the analysis of the data from the survey can be seen to be useful in making co-relational assumptions about the sample surveyed. The wider population is useful as a means of descriptive comparability as opposed to a specific statistical generalisation that may follow from a random sample. Despite the difficulties in locating the total RPS population, I would argue that the survey is formalised with 'typicality' in mind making it more significant than a convenience sample.

The potential survey sample after piloting was 120 CSP/SD students (former and current) these having been circulated with the survey questionnaire (appendix 1). They responded by returning fifty-five (55) of the original one hundred and twenty (120) by the given deadline. Eight students replied late, they are therefore not part of the formal analysis, but are included as an indicator in a postscript analysis (see section 5.2). It was felt that to ignore the late returns was unacceptable hence the postscript completed after the statistical analysis. The working sample from which the following analysis is produced is from a total of fifty-five (45.83%) returned questionnaires of the original one hundred

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<sup>36</sup> Mertens, R. 1998, 'What is to be Done? (With apologies to Lenin!)', in Parker, I. ed, *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, London, Sage, p.95.

<sup>37</sup> Robson C, 2002, *Real World Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London, Blackwell, p.264.

and twenty (120 = 100%) canvassed.<sup>38</sup> The immediate problem of the non-respondents means that it is not possible to account for their views in the research and no attempt will be made to imply probability to this lack of response. I maintain that the nature of the research as outlined will still hold significant validity within the existing framework.

The statistical analysis of the surveyed sample was carried out using SPSS version 10.5 and will go so far as to produce frequency tests relative to the numbers of respondents involved and a percentage breakdown of those numbers. This method produces tables relative to frequency of individual variables derived from the questions in the questionnaire. Specific cross tabulation and chi square tests will follow in order to address the aims of the study and address the significance of related questions from a statistical perspective. The statistical analysis reflects directly on 'alternative forms of assessment' including the hypotheses that presentation as a form of assessment empowers students, and generally raises standards compared with essay and examination grades.

#### 4.1 Analysis of the Questionnaire

The surveyed sample answered a questionnaire (appendix 1) designed in three parts, with a total of twenty questions. Questions one to five deal with 'Academic Details', six to ten with 'Personal Details' and eleven to twenty with the 'Analysis of Presentation Experience'. The twenty questions were subsequently broken down into thirty-seven individual variables when subject to input by SPSS. I will describe the variables and the frequency test results which give numbers of respondents and valid percentage figures for those numbers. Any missing values throughout the analysis are the result of a respondent failing to answer a question or part thereof (variable).

Part one of the questionnaire deals with the following five questions (Q): Q.1 The year respondents entered level 2 (5); Q.2 The numbers of years studied; Q.3 Full time or part time students; Q.4 Pathway or programme change at level 2 (5) or 3 (6); Q.5 Type of student (Religion Culture and Belief (RCB), Specialist Degree (SD), Development Studies Student). There are five SPSS frequency charts reflecting the figures from part one which can be seen as 'Appendix 2' attached.

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<sup>38</sup> Despite the mention of sixty three returned questionnaires at the beginning of this report, which includes the eight late postscript questionnaires, the working analysis is from the original fifty-five (55) returned questionnaires.

Part two addresses questions six to ten: Q.6 Gender; Q.7 Ethnicity; Q.8 English as mother tongue; Q.9 Language (BBC, reasonable grammar, regional dialect); Q.10 Disability (a. Physically disabled, b. registered disabled, c. dyslexic, d. dyspraxic). The ten SPSS frequency tables reflecting questions six to ten are attached as Appendix 3.

Part three: questions eleven to twenty deal with the analysis of the 'Presentation Experience'. Q.11 Experience of assessment by group presentation (a. transferable skills, b. vocational skills, c. academically satisfying, d. be more imaginative/creative); Q.12 Why choose modules with presentations (a. interest in subject, b. test vocational skills, c. professional requirement, d. like lecturer's style, e. avoid examination module); Q.13 Ease of relating learning outcomes to assessment in collective presentations; Q.14 Find assessment fair; Q.15 enjoyment of presentations; Q.16 In New Religious Movements (NRM) was the same grade to all in the group, fair? Q.17 If part of validation change (in 2000) was removal of written submission fair? Q.18 Which group presentation did you prefer? (a. open sandwich, b. inter-active, c. illustrative drama) Q.19 Problems encountered (a. finding resources, b. uneven division of labour, c. finding time to meet, d. un-cooperatives or absentees, e. inadequate tutor support); Q.20 realisation of presentation with no right or wrong answer? The 22 remaining frequency tables covering questions 11 to 20 are attached as Appendix 4.

## 4.2 Sample Survey: Summary

The response to the questionnaire across all questions averages a mean response of 93.96%. This figure takes into account the lack of response to question 16 on 'New Religious Movements' (50.9%), and a similar non-response, to question 17, (43.6%). If this lack of response is removed the mean response increases to 96.62%. The student profile reveals 89.1% of the sample were full time students. A third of which (32.7%) changed their pathway after entry at level 2 (5). The gender division is males, 21.8%, females, 78.2%. This shows a disproportionately lower incidence of males compared with the CSP population of 37% overall (see fig. 1), and 28% males in the total Religious Studies programme (see fig. 2). It also shows a higher incidence of females in the sample compared with CSP 63% and RS 72%.

Ethnically the sample surveyed is made up of 16.4% ethnic minorities in total, compared with a CSP population of 25% and RS population of 27%. The lack of an age related question in the surveyed



sample does not allow for an analysis of students in terms of maturity. The figures for mature students in the canvassed one hundred and twenty students who were sent questionnaires was 55.83% mature (over 21) and 44.17% (under 21). Approximately 50% of returned questionnaires from the total sample of 55 analysed were from mature students, although the survey questions do not reflect this information.

The survey reflects a student type of 60% Religions Culture and Belief, 29.1% Specialists and 7.3% Development Studies students. The figures do not however reflect the individual student pathways as affects the RCB students. The average CSP pathway representation is 35% Major, 43% Joint and 22% Minor pathways. The level of recorded disability according to the surveyed sample is 14.55%, compared with the larger CSP population of 18%. The sample shows a high proportion of dyslexic students at 10.9%.

The 'Presentation Experience' reflects a high proportion (89.1%) of students who see the experience as a way to develop transferable skills. The testing of vocational skills for the future was also highly regarded, with 72.7% of respondents acknowledging this. The process as a way to be more imaginative and creative gained an 85.5% positive affirmation and presentation as an academically satisfying experience was agreed by 69.1% of respondents. This explains why there was no adverse criticism found on the module questionnaire forms except with regard to resources and attendance, as noted above.

The reasons for choosing presentations are clearly supported in the interest of subjects in a module for its own sake, where 89.1% of respondents agreed. The style of the lecturer figured in the positive affirmation of reasons with a small majority of 56.4%. The teaching requirement was seen negatively by 70.9%, as was the avoidance of examinations by the same figure. This left a negative response also, to the testing of vocational skills with 58.2%. Despite the same question receiving a positive affirmation under question 11(b) as an experience, it was not considered by the sample as a prime reason for choosing presentation. This is not entirely consistent with the answers to 11 (b). The respondents' understanding of assessment methods using presentations saw 74% respond positively. Similarly an overwhelming 89.1% saw the assessment methods in relation to presentations as fair, and 69.1% saw presentations as enjoyable. The most highly favoured method of presentation being the inter-active style supported by 60% of respondents.

Question 12, asking respondents to reveal any problems encountered in their experience of presentations revealed few problems with finding resources. Over half the sample (58.2%) had problems with a division of labour in group events and a similar number found absentee and un-cooperative students problematic. Very few (7.3%) had problems with tutors. The vast majority (70.9%) of respondents did not know that the assessment did not involve a right or wrong answer. This may be indicative of the student mind-set and culture in appreciating the possibility of an alternative. With this in mind it is unlikely that the participants were biased in any way towards presentation as the majority would hold a belief that they were as likely to present the presentation wrong in assessment terms, as they were right.

### 4.3 Cross-tabulation and Pearson Chi-Square Analysis

Having analysed the frequency (number) of respondents in the survey and their associated percentage figures relative to the questions asked in the questionnaire, the following section will use that information in asking questions of the researched sample based on statistical significance of a chi-square analysis. As the levels of respondents is small in the surveyed sample there is no attempt to take the significance levels further as it is not anticipated that such a set of results could be equated to a population beyond that of the larger CSP population described in this report. The analysis will use 'gender' and 'type of student' (RCB, SD or Development Studies) as a constant when addressing other variables such as ethnicity, disability, experience, reasons and problems encountered. The associated tables are displayed as appendix 5, attached.

Some of the fundamental questions identified within the study thus far reflect the need to look closely at why presentation was chosen, and how the experience of it was both positive and negative. Are disabled, including dyslexic students empowered by presentation methods of assessment? Do ethnic minorities find language problematic in a presentation scenario? Are mature students pre-disposed to presentations as an alternative method of assessment to examinations? Or is that assertion relevant for other definable groups making up the surveyed sample and the larger CSP population? It is hoped that by analysing these and other emerging questions this study will go some way to provide a positive reflection of presentation as a significant example of professional 'good practice'.

Firstly, I will address the question of presentation as a medium for transferable skills. I have used the crosstabs test relative to 'gender'

and 'student type' to include 'transferable skills' as part of 'presentation experience'.

The case summary, cross-tabulation and chi-square test set out in appendix 5 (a) are typical in analysing specific questions of two by two tables with a layered variable. This format will follow similarly with some of the following queries testing other research questions. The question set up by the test looks at the confidence levels of the sample across gender and student type when addressing transferable skills as a presentation experience. The cross-tabulation reveals only 2 males (RCB and Dev Studies) and 5 females (1 RCB, 3 SD, and 1 Dev. Studies) answered 'no' to transferable skills as their experience of presentation. The positive response, 'yes' to the same question was given by 9 males (4 RCB, 3 SD, and 2 Dev. Studies) and 38 females (27 RCB, 10 SD, and 1 Dev. Studies).

The resulting chi-square statistic shows an asymptotic significance (2 tailed) of 0.082 for the negative answer. A significance less than 0.1. The positive test 'yes' however, shows a significance level of 0.071, less than 0.1, giving a confidence level of approximately 93% in the test. This is a more acceptable level given that the removal of the development studies count of 2 would increase the significance level closer to 0.05 without affecting the overall positive relationship to the question. There is therefore an association between the gender and student types and their belief in transferable skills being attained by presentation assessment. The majority of females in the survey slightly skews the gender question; however nine out of eleven males is an overwhelming majority and tends to show that the vast majority in both genders saw presentation as essential in transferring skills.

The chi-square test 'dyslexic: why presentation' reflects the significance levels of dyslexic students avoiding examinations in modules, which by inference may support their use of presentation as an alternative. Despite small numbers of dyslexic students in the test, the total of six (10.9%) of the sample is high nationally. Of those six, one failed to answer the exam avoidance question. The remaining five were split. Three would avoid exams, and two would not. The uncertainty of the one missing answer is indicative of the difficulty of a dyslexic person's dilemma in choosing to sit exams or take a presentation as an alternative. There is however, due to small numbers, only anecdotal evidence to support this. The significance can be seen in appendix 5 (b) together with a cluster bar chart. The chi-square result shows a significance level of 0.073, less than 0.1. It is acceptable to report an

association between dyslexic respondents and their taking of examinations, despite 50% of cells with an expected count less than 5. This cannot be avoided due to the small sample involved. A larger sample may have tended towards avoiding examinations if you are dyslexic more significantly. This however is anecdotal.

The notion of empowerment is an essential part of this research project. A particularly relevant area in which to look is that of language, an essential ingredient in any oral presentation. The following cross-tabulation and chi-square results identify language as it is described by the respondents. The cross-tabs and chi-square tables are attached at appendix 5(c). The test views language in the questionnaire as either of a 'BBC standard', 'reasonably grammatically correct' or of a 'regional dialect'. The associated questions put to the sample (which is language related), reflect the use of language to include ethnic minorities and the issue of English being a respondent's mother tongue. The hypothesis being tested here, asks 'do language difficulties adversely affect a respondent's decision to choose a module with a presentation as a form of assessment?'

The cross-tabulation of language as affected by ethnicity reflects language of a regional dialect, and how that relates to both ethnic minorities and those whose mother tongue is not English within the sample. Conversely it also identifies those who are not ethnic minorities and how the question of English not being one's mother tongue relates to them. On the question of regional dialect, 34 claimed not to have one, and 18 believed they did. Of those that had no dialect, 27 were not ethnic minorities, and 7 were. Of the ethnic minority group 3 claimed English was not their mother tongue and 4 said it was. Of the 18 claiming a regional dialect 16 were not an ethnic minority group and 2 were. Of the 2 who were, 1 claimed English was not the mother tongue and the other that it was. This same set of variables was tested against the other two language variables, 'BBC' and 'reasonable grammar'.

The levels of significance associated with the test are high in the positive responses to the regional dialect question addressing ethnicity and the use of English as the mother tongue. The *p value* 0.004 is reflected in the responses as an asymptotic significance, showing a better than 95% confidence level in the association of language, ethnicity and mother tongue. The same can be said of the other two associated language tests. The 'reasonable grammar' chi-square result had a *p value* 0.002 in the positive response, showing similar high degrees of confidence in the association. The values for the 'BBC' question were

0.009 in the positive responses, verifying the association and rejecting the null hypotheses.

The total number of respondents who claimed to have BBC English was 14. Of that number 9 were not ethnic minorities and 5 were. Of the 9 who were not, all 9 claimed English as their mother tongue. Of the 5 ethnic minorities with BBC English, 3 claimed not to have English as their mother tongue and 2 said their mother tongue was English. The total number of ethnic minority students in the sample was 9. Of that number over half (5) claimed BBC English, and 4 did not. All chose presentation as a means of assessment demonstrating the possible association between the type of language of the student and the ability of that language to empower a decision to use it in presentation assessments. Empowerment through language in presentation is applicable to both a majority of the ethnic minority sample, and over half of the non-ethnic minority group sampled, the majority of whom were non ethnic without a regional dialect and had English as their mother tongue.

Presentation as a means to challenge a lack of self-confidence is addressed in appendix 5 (d). The non-ethnic minority group is split 24 to 21, 53.33% in favour of it being a challenge to a lack of confidence, while the 9 in the ethnic minority sample are divided 7 in favour, 2 against a challenge to a lack of self-confidence. The ethnic minority divide is 77.78% in favour of presentations as a challenge to a lack of self-confidence.

Part of this analysis, as described earlier, necessitates a closer look at the number of respondents who would use presentation modules in order to avoid those which contain examinations as a more traditional form of assessment. This has been reflected in dyslexic respondents, and can be seen as part of appendix 5 (e) attached, as a sample using gender. The number that responded to this question was 53 out of 55, with only two missing who failed to answer. The majority 39 in number (70.9%) did not avoid examinations to take a presentation-assessed module. The subsequent chi-square analysis does not find any statistical association between these variables, and thereby supports the negative assumption of the majority in relation to this question. The fact that this example reflects across all respondents by gender does not detract from other groups within the sample, like dyslexics or ethnic minorities, that may reflect a different outcome in their treatment of the examination question. The clear indication is that students (according to their own

accounts) do not take modules with presentations in order to avoid examinations.

### 5.1 Module Analysis

The CSP modular system in place at the University of Derby accredits RS students with module grades attained as part of a degree programme. In reviewing the grades and modules made up of presentation, course work and examination assessments it is hoped that a snapshot of the RS population over the preceding six years will reflect a method of analysis that can compare RS module grades with those in their other CSP subject areas. The availability of modules depends on the availability of staff and student choice; therefore not all modules with presentations have run every year. This particularly applies to the field experience modules. I will analyse a systematic random sample of forty student grades across all six years covered by the project. The analysis will look at the student by age, pathway taken, and numbers of presentations they were involved in. A comparative analysis of their presentation grades compared with their non-presentation grades is used as an indicator for a wider comparison between RS grades and other CSP grades attained by the same students. This will also involve looking at those students in the sample who undertook both presentation and examination as part of their programme and a comparison of the best examination grades with best presentation grades.

The sample is taken from a systematic random selection based on twenty students each year from 1996 to 2001, a total of one hundred and twenty students. This figure was ascertained by selecting every fourth student from a total of 478 undergraduates between 1996 and 2001 (approximate average of 80 per year). The sample equates to twenty per year when the total is rounded up to 480. This accounts for the .5 of a student left over in an exact calculation of 478, which is equal to 119.5 students. The sample figure (20 per year) is approximately 25% of each year's population. The selected 120 were numbered and systematically chosen by number. Every third number became part of the surveyed sample, leaving a total sample of forty. The final sample (identified below in figure 3), reflects six students from 1996, seven in 1997 and 1998, six students from 1999 and seven in 2000 and 2001, and is referred to as the 'Random Sample Profile'.

### The Random Sample Profile

Male	Female	F/time	P/time	>21	<21	Maj	Joint	Min	Path Change	Ethnic Min.
12	28	32	8	23	17	24	8	8	5	12
0%	0%	0%	0%	7.5%	2.5%	0%	0%	0%	2.5%	0%

**Figure 3**

The disproportionate numbers of males to females is reflected in the greater RS population. The full time: part time ratio is also representative of the total population. The large numbers of mature students is also in line with the larger RS population, but not so with the CSP population as a whole. The pathway is heavily supported by a major route with joint and minor pathways reflecting similar percentages. Of those that changed pathway during the last two years of their degree four out of five improved their grades and completed the degree course and one failed to improve and complete. Of those five, all undertook modules containing presentations; none chose modules which offered examinations as part of the assessment method. The ethnic minorities represented in the sample are above average for the larger CSP population.

From the sample of forty, there were a total of 77 presentations undertaken, indicating an average of almost 2 presentations per student (1.93). Allowing for the approximate third validation requirements of the University, this is in keeping with that strategy accepting that students at level 2 (5) and 3 (6) would expect to take six modules as a major pathway student and two as a minor, or four as a joint pathway. The validation criterion only works effectively with major pathway students. The fact that 24 students (60%) in the sample have taken a major pathway suggests they completed 48 presentation modules, leaving the remaining 8 (20%) joint and 8 (20%) minor students taking the remaining 32 presentation modules (16 per pathway joint and minor). These figures are approximate to the data and should not be seen as exact. The table below (figure 4) shows an exact count and percentage value of presentation modules undertaken by the sample from the total of 77.

### Presentations Taken by Random Sample

<b>Number of Presentations</b>	0	1	2	3	4
<b>Number of Students Taking Pres.</b>	7	9	10	8	6
<b>% (77= 100%)</b>	17.5	22.5	25	20	15

**Figure 4**

The table above (figure 4) outlines the number of students taking presentations. There were seven who didn't take any, nine who took only 1, ten who took 2 presentations, eight taking 3 each and six who each took 4. Of the total sample of forty, sixteen (40%) took one presentation or less, eighteen (45%) took up to three and six (15%) took four.

The sample is subject to a comparison, using an average of their presentation grades compared with an average of their other grades (non-presentation) within RS. Thirty-seven students were sampled, three were not due to insufficient numbers of grades available to make the comparative study. Of the 37, the number of students who had a better presentation average than other grades was 10 (25%), those with similar grades in both presentation and other grades was 14 (35%), and those who showed a worse grade on average in their presentations was 13 (32.5%). The number not compared was 3 (7.5%). Of the total (40) sampled, 24 students (60%) had the same or better grades in presentation modules than other grades in Religious studies.

To take this methodology a stage further a comparison was also carried out with those students who took examinations and presentations in RS modules. A total of 22 students (55% of the sample) took examinations. When looking at their best examination grade against their best presentation grade the following pattern emerged. Eighteen students showed a better grade in presentation than in examination, three showed the same grade in both, and only one had a better examination grade than a presentation grade.

## 5.2 Postscript

Eight replies were received too late to be included in the main sample. I felt we could not ignore eight voices, especially as they are a near representative spread,

QI, Entering year 2 : 1 : 1996; 1: 1997; 3: 1998, 1: 1999 and 2 : 2000



*The spread corresponds to the main sample almost exactly.*

All had been full time students, but 25% had extended their study for an extra year, which is quite common if academic, personal or family difficulties are encountered. *Extended study is 5% higher, but there are no MA ex Derby students included here. Students who fail to progress from one stage to another generally go part-time but it seems respondents did not consider a seventh semester made them 'part-time'.*

None changed their pathway or programme in the second year. One did not understand the question, presumably because entering year 2 in 1996 she had belonged to the former BA/B Ed. programme before the specialist programmes (SD) began. Otherwise 6 were Religions, Culture and Belief students, one Religious, Social and Cultural Studies. *This does not reflect the main sample where 32.7% changed. There were no Third World Development Studies students among the whole.* The male/female ratio was 1:7. A Muslim woman was the only ethnic minority, non-English mother tongue speaker. Three considered they spoke BBC English, five that they spoke reasonably grammatically, and two who did not speak BBC English declared a regional dialect.

None considered they had physical disabilities or dyslexia, though one I know had an assessment at Student Services and was allowed extra time in examinations. This illustrates the problems of using addresses in one's files, questions of confidentiality, and also the potential mis-match between the students' declared self-perceptions and the tutor's awareness of a problem.

This is reflected in the main sample, where 7.3% considered themselves disabled in some way, but of the 120 sent questionnaires, twelve are known to have had physical problems: three were severe car accident victims, and nine dyslexics.

Q11, Analysis of presentation experience:

Six saw it as a means of gaining transferable skills, one did not, and one did not reply.

The same six thought they gained vocational skills, one did not and one did not reply.

*These replies represent 75% as opposed to 70% awareness.*

Four of the six saw it as academically satisfying, two did not, and one did not reply.

*Academic satisfaction is only 50% not 69.1%.*

All six saw it as an opportunity for creativity, with the same dissident, and the same abstainer. Here the percentage responses are almost identical.

This abstainer then indicated a problem with lack of self-confidence, as did 5 others.

*This is a much higher response concerning confidence than the main sample.*

Q12, Reasons for choosing modules with presentations:

Six affirmed interest in the subject, 2 negatives.

*25% negative contrasts with 7.3% of the main sample.*

Two considered knowledge of the religion in the module a professional requirement.

Here 75% answered in the negative compared with 58.2% of the main sample, but that could reflect future or present teachers being more efficient at meeting deadlines. Three liked the lecturer's style. (37.5% compared with 56.4%).

Two were trying to avoid an examination.

*This represents 25% compared with 30%.*

Q13, five found the Learning Outcomes easily achievable (62.5%, *lower than the main sample at 74.5%*).

Q14, All found the assessment fair, in contrast with 9.1% dissidents overall.

Q15, two did not enjoy doing presentations. *This is the same percentage as the main sample.*

Q16, five did not do *New Religious Movements*, 2 found the common group mark fair, one not. *This is a higher response rate than the main sample.*

Q17, of the three who took presentations after 2000 when there was no written submission, 2 found this fair, 1 not. *This is more or less the same reply as the main sample.*

Q18, ref styles of presentation, 3 preferred the 'inter-active', 2 the 'open sandwich' (including one who also liked the inter-active style) and 3 the 'docu-drama'. *A significantly higher proportion preferred the drama style compared with the main sample.*

Q19. Problems encountered:

- 2 out of 8 had problems finding resources and visual aids. *No variation.*
- 6 thought the labour was unevenly divided. *Significantly higher (41.8%).*
- 5 found it difficult to meet together as a group. *Similar to main sample.*
- 3 found there was a problem of absenteeism. *Similar to main sample.*
- 1 thought the tutor support was inadequate. *Higher than main sample.*

Q20. Concerning awareness of whether the assessment criteria involved a 'right' or 'wrong' answer, five had no such awareness, three had. This is within 2% of the main sample.

It is difficult to find much degree of difference in what might be considered a random group, those who failed to reply by the deadline for inclusion in the main samples, since a 5% deviance is within the margin of error for such statistics. There is, however a consistency of attitude, which is interesting, given that these are 85% Combined Subjects Programme students, and the male:female ratio is what one would expect.

To a considerable extent the results of the postscript questionnaires validates the results from the main sample and hence its inclusion here.

## 6.1 Conclusions

This research has demonstrated the fallibility of programme leaders' impressions and students' perceptions of the process. As a tutor one can become very involved with a particular student's progress and fail to judge correctly whether this student is typical of the situation or not. The 120 chosen had all had some involvement with their tutor over the years and requested a reference and left an address; but while this might account for the comparatively high level of response nevertheless there is considerable deviation from the expected norm of answers that would have validated our expected opening hypotheses. In selecting the 120 students we endeavoured to obtain as ecumenical a cross section of students as possible; however the 63 respondents are not similarly representative. It is also fair to say that in certain cases their replies were not entirely consistent.

Having examined how presentations function as a form of assessment where there is no right or wrong answer using a questionnaire, and analysed the students perceptions thereof we have

established that there is a strong sense of positive enjoyment of the presentation. Students appear to have understood the learning outcomes and what was required of them in terms of delivery of their contribution. Presentations however do suffer from the ambiguity of having both summative and formative elements in the assessment. The enjoyment of both students and staff has been affected by what I have referred to in my Annual Reports as ‘persistent casual absenteeism’. However, neither discussing the problem at programme committees nor invoking disciplinary matters has resolved the problem completely. Perhaps as word spreads that presentations are to be enjoyed, students will participate more and staff will be less apprehensive.

Does this achievement represent empowerment? If the surveyed sample are to be taken seriously, and there is no reason why not, the fact that 77.78% of ethnic minority respondents saw presentation as a positive challenge to a lack of self confidence speaks volumes for this project. In addition the non-ethnic response to the same question provides over 50% who saw presentation as a positive challenge. From the sample postscript in particular we can see that students with disabilities and dyslexia may be being empowered but because they do not identify themselves in this category in the questionnaire (despite having registered with student services) they are not aware of this. It is very significant that only two students ever had to be found an alternative means of assessment.

The success of the assessment method may be due in part at least, to the emphasis on fieldwork with a hands on approach to the study of religion using local and overseas visits, extensive interviewing of believers and a ‘feminist experiential approach’. That is, the content of the modules may contribute to the success rate of the students. Students can replicate their experiences by seminars, drama, interviews etc. The fact that tutors throw themselves into the spirit of the presentations and contribute by their questions at the end is a necessary part of the equation that could be explored further.

The fact that the overwhelming majority of respondents saw the presentation experience as positive in obtaining transferable skills for the future shows an element of forward thinking in a way that cannot always be readily seen in text based assessment. The needs of students to develop a positive oral ability is well documented: the sample here hold firmly to that belief, and for those in ethnic minorities and disabled categories who too easily are described as lacking empowerment and

confidence, this type of assessment does by their own admission provide a challenge that is ultimately empowering.

When considering the grades of those taking oral presentations it is evident that high proportions are both female and mature students. The evidence suggests the quality of grades is higher in these groups than in other subjects in their own and other subject areas. It is not possible to draw a clear conclusion here as to how their grades are consistently higher than in other subjects but it does allow for a reflective view that there is a sense of empowerment here that is driving the grades upward. This would suggest that recent research into the way girls are out performing boys, even from as young as 7, and the improving grades of girls at 'A' level (now assessed by coursework as well as examination) is being extended to University level.

Therefore we believe we have established the case for the empowering nature of presentation as a means of assessment with its right to be considered an integral part of the whole assessment process.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to our former subject team colleagues who helped launch this study and who no longer work for the University of Derby, namely Professor Richard King and Dr Balbinder Bhogal. Professor John Hinnells usefully provided challenging reflections on the one occasion in 2002 when he conducted assessment by presentation in Derby. The Revd David Hart has played a similar role in his assessments of the module *Inter-Religious Dialogue* since 1998. The statistics which Dr John Hey, Graham Parker and Richard Tarplee compiled for the QAA inspection have been very important in enabling us to locate our findings in the wider academic context. The present External Examiner for undergraduate courses, Ms Peggy Morgan, has been extremely supportive of our efforts at innovative assessment. Finally we are indebted to our families for their restraint when leisure activities and the housework had to make way for the demands of this work. However, none of this would have been possible without the encouragement of the team at the Learning and Teaching Support Network office who stuck with the project until it was completed in a somewhat different form from the original proposal.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thanks are also due to Professor Paul Weller, as line manager, and those who provided secretarial and technical assistance, and especially to the students who returned their questionnaires.

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## Questionnaire

### Appendix 1

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#### **Questionnaire concerning the use of presentations in assessment at the University of Derby.**

This questionnaire forms a vital part of a research project into the effectiveness of modes of assessment such as presentations where there is no right or wrong answer. We need your reflections to assist in this research. All replies will be treated with the utmost confidence, and the data extrapolated will be processed in such a way as to ensure complete anonymity. The project has been funded by the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network, Leeds, who will publish it in due course.

*Please circle your chosen answer.*

**The initial questions concern personal identity because one thesis that needs to be tested is that presentations enable people to achieve fairer grades closer to their natural ability and their acquired skills than formal examinations and essays.**

#### **A Academic details**

1. Circle the year in which you entered Level 2 (5)  
1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001.
2. For how many further years did you study?  
2 3 4 5
3. Were you
  - a) Full time? Y/N
  - b) Part time? Y/N
4. Did you change your pathway or programme during Level 2 or 3?  
Y/N
5.
  - a) Are you a Religions: Culture and Belief student ? Y/N
  - b) A Specialist degree programme student? Y/N
  - c) A Development Studies Student? Y/N

## B Personal Details

6. Are you  
Male ? Female?
7. Do you consider yourself to belong to an ethnic minority in Derby?  
Y/N
8. Is English your mother tongue? Y/N
9. Do you consider you speak
  - a) BBC English ? Y/N
  - b) reasonably grammatically? Y/N
  - c) with a regional dialect? Y/N
10.
  - a) Do you consider yourself physically disabled? Y/N
  - b) Are you registered disabled? Y/N
  - c) Are you dyslexic ? Y/N
  - d) Are you dyspraxic (exceptionally unco-ordinated or clumsy)  
Y/N

## C Analysis of presentation experience

11. What was your *general* experience of assessment by group presentation:
  - a) An opportunity to gain transferable skills ? (such as data handling, use of classroom technology, public speaking, team work etc) Y/N
  - b) An opportunity to test vocational skills relevant for my future career? Y/N
  - c) An academically satisfying experience? Y/N
  - d) A chance to be more imaginative and creative than in conventional assessment such as examinations? Y/N
  - e) A personal challenge because of my lack of self-confidence etc? Y/N
12. Why *primarily* did you choose the modules you did choose which had assessment by means of presentation?
  - a) Interest in the subject for its own sake Y/N
  - b) An opportunity to test vocational skills relevant to my future career Y/N



c) Professional requirement for teaching that I study that religion  
Y/N

d) I liked the lecturer's style Y/N

e) I was trying to avoid taking a module with an examination  
instead Y/N

13. Did you find it relatively easy to relate the module Learning  
Outcomes to the assessment exercise, given that learning outcomes are  
achieved collectively and not individually? Y/N

14. Did you *generally* find the assessment fair? Y/N

15. Did you on the whole enjoy doing presentations? Y/N

16. If you did *New Religious Movements* , did you consider the system of  
awarding the same grade to all members of the group fair? Y/N

17. If your experience spans the validation changes introduced in  
Autumn 2000, do you consider the removal of a written group  
submission, and individual pieces as logical and fair? Y/N

18. Over the years, three types of group presentation emerged. Tick  
which you experienced, and circle your preference:

‘Open sandwich’ type slices of material piled up as one student  
after another dealt with aspects of the topic;  
Inter-active (Blue Peter style) 2-3 students co-presenting material;  
Illustrative drama or sketch with commentary

19. What problems did you encounter?

Finding appropriate resources and visual aids  
Uneven division of labour among the group  
Finding time to meet as a group  
Unco-operative or absentee individuals  
Inadequate tutor support

20. Were you aware that assessment criteria (as set out in programme  
handbooks) did not require presentation of a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer ?

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire. We are greatly  
indebted to you for your co-operation.

## Appendix 2

### SPSS Frequency Outputs

#### Question 1 to 5: Academic Details

#### Frequency Tables

##### Question 1

##### degree year

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1996	6	10.9	12.0	12.0
	1997	4	7.3	8.0	20.0
	1998	14	25.5	28.0	48.0
	1999	7	12.7	14.0	62.0
	2000	13	23.6	26.0	88.0
	2001	6	10.9	12.0	100.0
	Total		50	90.9	100.0
Missing	System	5	9.1		
Total		55	100.0		

##### Question 2

##### years studied

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2 years	34	61.8	70.8	70.8
	3years	11	20.0	22.9	93.8
	4 years	1	1.8	2.1	95.8
	5 years	2	3.6	4.2	100.0
	Total		48	87.3	100.0
Missing	System	7	12.7		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 3

**full/part time**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	full time	49	89.1	90.7	90.7
	part time	5	9.1	9.3	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 4

**path change**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	36	65.5	66.7	66.7
	yes	18	32.7	33.3	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 5

**type of student**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	rcb	33	60.0	62.3	62.3
	specialist	16	29.1	30.2	92.5
	dev studies	4	7.3	7.5	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Appendix 3

### SPSS Frequency Outputs

#### Question 6 to 10: Personal Details

#### Question 6

##### gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid male	12	21.8	21.8	21.8
female	43	78.2	78.2	100.0
Total	55	100.0	100.0	

#### Question 7

##### ethnic minority

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid no	46	83.6	83.6	83.6
yes	9	16.4	16.4	100.0
Total	55	100.0	100.0	

#### Question 8

##### English tongue

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid no	5	9.1	9.3	9.3
yes	49	89.1	90.7	100.0
Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing System	1	1.8		
Total	55	100.0		

## Question 9 (a)

## language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	BBC English no	38	69.1	71.7	71.7
	BBC English yes	15	27.3	28.3	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 9 (b)

## language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	reasonable grammer no	19	34.5	35.8	35.8
	reasonable grammer yes	34	61.8	64.2	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 9 (c)

## language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	regional dialect no	35	63.6	66.0	66.0
	regional dialect yes	18	32.7	34.0	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 10 (a)

**disability**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	physical disability no	51	92.7	94.4	94.4
	physical disability yes	3	5.5	5.6	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 10 (b)

**reg disabled**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	reg disabled no	53	96.4	98.1	98.1
	reg disabled yes	1	1.8	1.9	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 10 (c)

**dyslexic**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	dyslexic no	49	89.1	89.1	89.1
	dyslexic yes	6	10.9	10.9	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

## 10 (d) Question

**dyspraxic**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	dyspraxic no	54	98.2	98.2	98.2
	dyspraxic yes	1	1.8	1.8	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

**Appendix 4****SPSS Frequency Outputs****Question 11 to 20: Analysis of Presentation Experience**

## Question 11 (a)

**presentation experience**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	transferable skills no	5	9.1	9.3	9.3
	transferable skills yes	49	89.1	90.7	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 11 (b)

**presentation experience**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	test voc skills no	13	23.6	24.5	24.5
	test voc skills yes	40	72.7	75.5	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 11 (c)

**presentation experience**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	academic satisfaction no	14	25.5	26.9	26.9
	academic satisfaction yes	38	69.1	73.1	100.0
	Total	52	94.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	5.5		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 11 (d)

**presentation experience**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	more imag creative no	7	12.7	13.0	13.0
	more imag creative yes	47	85.5	87.0	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 11 (e)

**presentation experience**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	challenge lack self no	23	41.8	42.6	42.6
	challenge lack of self yes	31	56.4	57.4	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		



## Question 12 (a)

**why presentation**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	interest own sake no	4	7.3	7.5	7.5
	interest own sake yes	49	89.1	92.5	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 12 (b)

**why presentation**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	test voc skills no	32	58.2	61.5	61.5
	test voc skills yes	20	36.4	38.5	100.0
	Total	52	94.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	5.5		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 12 (c)

**why presentation**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	teaching requirement no	39	70.9	78.0	78.0
	teaching requirement yes	11	20.0	22.0	100.0
	Total	50	90.9	100.0	
Missing	System	5	9.1		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 12 (d)

**why presentation**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	like lecturer's style no	23	41.8	42.6	42.6
	like lecturer's style yes	31	56.4	57.4	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 12 (e)

**why presentation**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	avoid exam module no	39	70.9	73.6	73.6
	avoid exam module yes	14	25.5	26.4	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 13

**ease of learning outcomes to assessment process**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	14	25.5	25.5	25.5
	yes	41	74.5	74.5	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

## Question 14

**was assessment fair**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	5	9.1	9.3	9.3
	yes	49	89.1	90.7	100.0
	Total	54	98.2	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.8		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 15

**enjoyment of presentations**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	14	25.5	26.9	26.9
	yes	38	69.1	73.1	100.0
	Total	52	94.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	5.5		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 16

**was NRM grading fair**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	15	27.3	53.6	53.6
	yes	13	23.6	46.4	100.0
	Total	28	50.9	100.0	
Missing	System	27	49.1		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 17

**was removal of written submission reasonable**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	11	20.0	45.8	45.8
	yes	13	23.6	54.2	100.0
	Total	24	43.6	100.0	
Missing	System	31	56.4		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 18

**which type of group presentation did you prefer**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	a open sandwich	15	27.3	28.3	28.3
	b inter-active	33	60.0	62.3	90.6
	c illustrative drama	5	9.1	9.4	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 19 (a)

**problems encountered**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	finding resources no	38	69.1	71.7	71.7
	finding resources yes	15	27.3	28.3	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 19 (b)

## problems encountered

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	uneven labour division no	21	38.2	39.6	39.6
	uneven labour division yes	32	58.2	60.4	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 19 (c)

## problems encountered

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	finding time to meet no	13	23.6	24.5	24.5
	finding time to meet yes	40	72.7	75.5	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

## Question 19 (d)

## problems encountered

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	unco-op or absentees no	21	38.2	39.6	39.6
	un co-op or absentees yes	32	58.2	60.4	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 19 (e)

**problems encountered**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	inadequate tutor support no	46	83.6	86.8	86.8
	inadequate tutor support yes	7	12.7	13.2	100.0
	Total	53	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	2	3.6		
Total		55	100.0		

Question 20

**awareness of no right or wrong in presentation assessment**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	39	70.9	75.0	75.0
	yes	13	23.6	25.0	100.0
	Total	52	94.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	5.5		
Total		55	100.0		

## Appendix 5 (a)

### Case Summary Cross-tabulation: Chi-Square Test: Transferable Skills

#### Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
gender * type of student * presentation experience	52	94.5%	3	5.5%	55	100.0%

#### gender \* type of student \* presentation experience Crosstabulation

Count

presentation experience			type of student			Total
			rcb	specialist	dev studies	
transferable skills no	gender	male	1		1	2
		female		3		3
	Total		1	3	1	5
transferable skills yes	gender	male	4	3	2	9
		female	27	10	1	38
	Total		31	13	3	47

#### Chi-Square Tests

presentation experience		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
transferable skills no	Pearson Chi-Square	5.000 <sup>a</sup>	2	.082
	Likelihood Ratio	6.730	2	.035
	Linear-by-Linear Association	.000	1	1.000
	N of Valid Cases	5		
transferable skills yes	Pearson Chi-Square	5.286 <sup>b</sup>	2	.071
	Likelihood Ratio	4.201	2	.122
	Linear-by-Linear Association	4.125	1	.042
	N of Valid Cases	47		

a. 6 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .40.

b. 3 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .57.

## Appendix 5 (b)

### dyslexic \* why presentation Crosstabulation

Count		why presentation		Total
		avoid exam module no	avoid exam module yes	
dyslexic	dyslexic no	37	11	48
	dyslexic yes	2	3	5
Total		39	14	53

### Why Presentation? Avoid Exams: Dyslexic Students

#### Chi-Square Tests

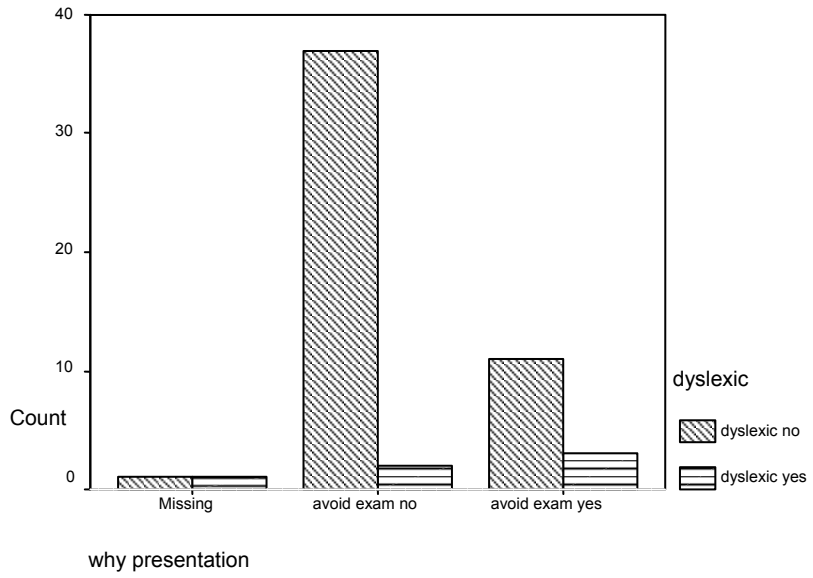
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.204 <sup>b</sup>	1	.073		
Continuity Correction <sup>a</sup>	1.580	1	.209		
Likelihood Ratio	2.796	1	.095		
Fisher's Exact Test				.108	.108
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.143	1	.076		
N of Valid Cases	53				

a. Computed only for a 2x2 table

b. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.32.



### Why Presentation? Avoid Exams: Dyslexic Students



## Appendix 5 (c)

### ethnic minority \* English tongue \* language Cross-tabulation

Count

language			English tongue		Total
			no	yes	
regional dialect no	ethnic minority	no	1	26	27
		yes	3	4	7
		Total	4	30	34
regional dialect yes	ethnic minority	no		16	16
		yes	1	1	2
		Total	1	17	18

### Chi-Square Tests

language		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
regional dialect no	Pearson Chi-Square	8.209 <sup>b</sup>	1	.004	.021	.021
	Continuity Correction <sup>a</sup>	4.871	1	.027		
	Likelihood Ratio	6.515	1	.011		
	Fisher's Exact Test					
	Linear-by-Linear Association	7.968	1	.005		
	N of Valid Cases	34				
regional dialect yes	Pearson Chi-Square	8.471 <sup>c</sup>	1	.004	.111	.111
	Continuity Correction <sup>a</sup>	1.621	1	.203		
	Likelihood Ratio	4.952	1	.026		
	Fisher's Exact Test					
	Linear-by-Linear Association	8.000	1	.005		
	N of Valid Cases	18				

a. Computed only for a 2x2 table

b. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .82.

c. 3 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .11.

**ethnic minority \* English tongue \* language Cross-tabulation**

Count

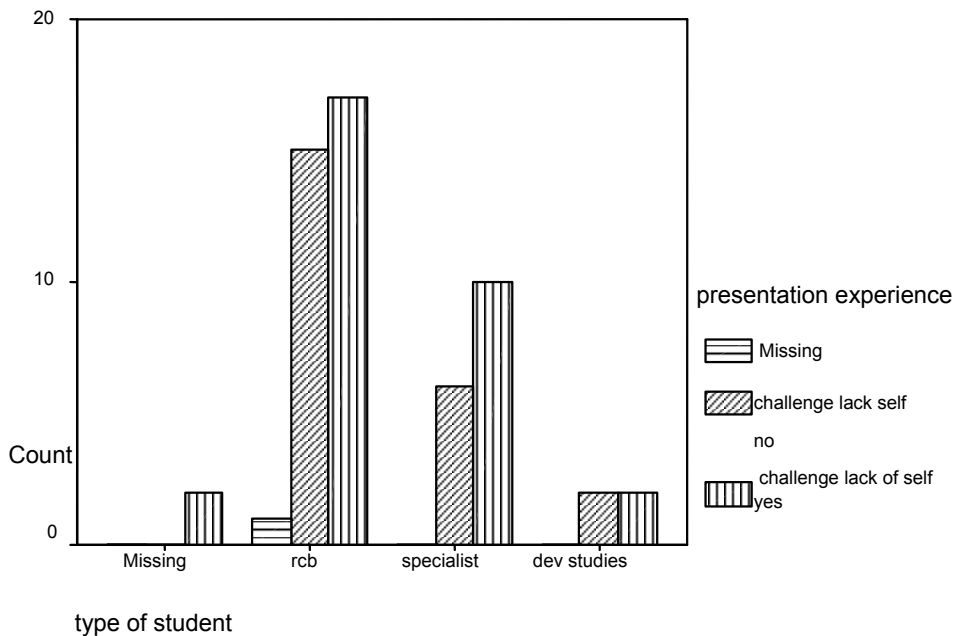
language			English tongue		Total
			no	yes	
BBC English no	ethnic minority	no	1	33	34
		yes	1	3	4
	Total		2	36	38
BBC English yes	ethnic minority	no		9	9
		yes	3	2	5
	Total		3	11	14

**Appendix 5(d)****presentation experience \* ethnic minority Cross-tabulation**

Count

		ethnic minority		Total
		no	yes	
presentation experience	challenge lack self no	21	2	23
	challenge lack of self yes	24	7	31
Total		45	9	54

### Type of Student: Challenge Lack of Self Confidence



## Appendix 5 (e)

### why presentation \* gender Cross-tabulation

Count

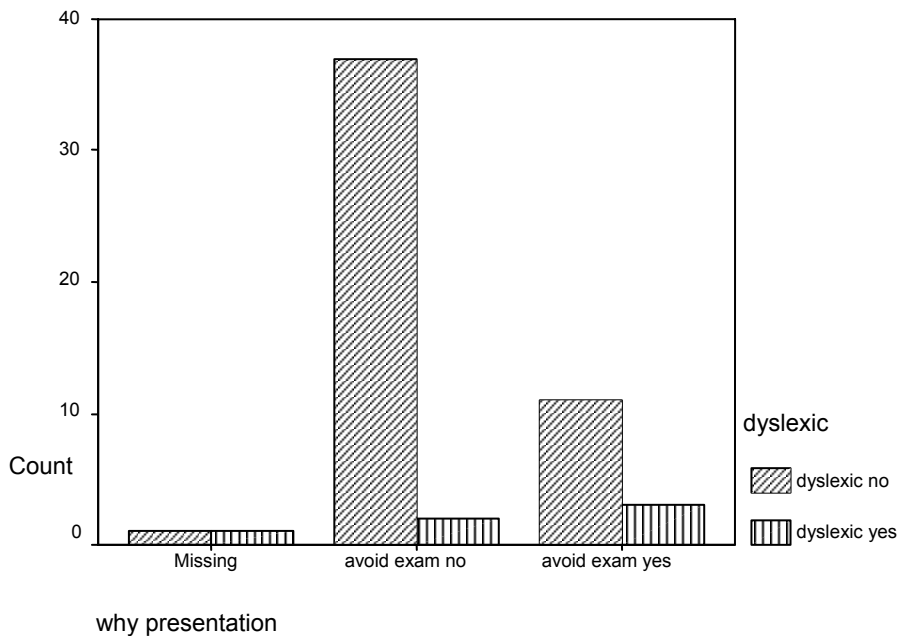
		gender		Total
		male	female	
why presentation	avoid exam module no	9	30	39
	avoid exam module yes	3	11	14
Total		12	41	53

### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.204 <sup>b</sup>	1	.073		
Continuity Correction <sup>a</sup>	1.580	1	.209		
Likelihood Ratio	2.796	1	.095		
Fisher's Exact Test				.108	.108
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.143	1	.076		
N of Valid Cases	53				

a. Computed only for a 2x2 table

b. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.32.



## **Notes and Details**

## Notes for Authors

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### Introduction

These notes apply to free submissions to the journal and to submitted project reports from funded projects.

**All documents submitted to the PRS-LTSN Subject Centre should be of a high, publishable quality.** Please ensure you have proof-read and corrected your documents before submitting them. The editor reserves the right to correct documents for spelling, grammar, layout, consistency and style.

From August 2003, the content of reports and articles will be stored electronically in a database of resources. The format used for storage is XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language), which means that for submissions to this journal it does not matter how documents look, but it is important that they are structured logically and that the same tag or style is applied to the same type of text (headings, blocks of basic text, quotations, endnotes or footnotes, etc.). The following guidelines should therefore be used in preparation of documents to ensure that they can be formatted correctly for this journal and stored appropriately in the database/website.

### Word Count

Freely submitted articles for peer-review should be no longer than 8,000 words. Project reports should not exceed 12,000 words, or should be submitted in independently publishable parts. Shorter discussion pieces or event reports should be limited to under 2,000 words.

### Applying Styles

The following notes are designed for use with MS Word (but can be adapted for other applications as required—please contact the Editor, [david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)). In MS Word the types of text within a document are determined by what are called ‘styles’. These are available in a drop-down menu on the formatting tool bar. Make sure that you apply the style you want to all the text intended, including paragraph returns.



## Allowed Styles

Use **ONLY** the following styles within a document:

- Heading 1
- Heading 2
- Heading 3
- Heading 4
- Body Text
- Block Quotation/Block Quote
- Endnote ref
- Endnote text
- List Bullet
- List Number
- (see below for tables, diagrams and pictures)

**For further formatting use only:**

- Superscript
- Subscript
- Italic
- Bold

Paragraphs should be separated by a double carriage return only—no indent (tab).

**DO NOT:**

- Use Normal as a style
- Make headings by adjusting the font, font size or layout of text
- Use section breaks within a document
- Use white spaces or tabs to layout text or data

**DO remember to:**

- Nest headings and lists logically
- Only use the styles allowed
- Use endnotes instead of footnotes

## Tables, diagrams and pictures

All data that needs to be presented in a fixed form must be within a table. Authors must not use spaces or tabs to try to achieve the desired layout. Tables should be kept as simple as possible.

Pictures and diagrams should be saved as .tif, .jpg or .gif format and sent separately. The intended location of the item within the final text should be indicated in square brackets.

## Referencing

**Additionally, please follow these conventions for referencing from within the body of the document:**

### 1. Books

Surname of author followed by forenames (if known) or initials, comma; title in italics; if applicable, additional information, such as translator, number of edition, or number of volume, separated by commas; place, colon, publisher, comma, date in brackets; number of pages. e.g.:

Smith, John Edward, *Religious Studies in Higher Education* (London & New York: Goodfellow, 1999), xi+389pp.

Brown, F.A. and Green, G.B., *Teaching Philosophy of Science to Science Students*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Educational Press, 2000), xx+210pp.

Teufelsdröckh, Diogenes, *What to Wear when Teaching Philosophy*, translated by Carlyle, Thomas, 5th edition (Ecclefechan: Heritage Books, 1912), 79pp.

### 2. Contributions

As above, but with the title of the contribution in double quotes, followed by 'in' and the names of the editors, and with the pages of the contribution specified. e.g.:

Jones, David Simon, "Reading the Bible", in Lector, H. & Anagnostopoulos, P., *Teaching Students to Read Primary Texts* (London: Generic Wisdom Educational, 2001), pp.210-241.

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Livingstone, David, "Professor Galileo I Presume? Introducing Students to 17th-Century Scientists in the Post-Modern Context", *Teaching History of Science*, 7/2, 1999, 40-62.

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### **Discourse**

PRS-LTSN

School of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0)113 343 1166

[david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)

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