

AAPT Small Grant Report

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Rationale

Often when philosophers are tasked with introducing the discipline of philosophy to their students, they take a historical approach. Even when courses are presented not chronologically but topically, philosophy is often presented *primarily* as a discipline of the past. Of course, not every intro class is taught in this way, but this seems to remain as one of the dominant approaches to introducing philosophy.

While I don't think there is anything wrong with teaching the history of philosophy, for this project, I wanted to take a different approach to introducing philosophy to students by introducing philosophy primarily as a vibrant and living discipline that is made of real life philosophers that continue to tackle interesting and difficult questions that are directly relevant to the most pressing questions we face in our communities.

One problem with the historical approach as it is often implemented and one of my reasons for introducing philosophy through living philosophers is also to address the problem of the lack of diversity in our field. Philosophy as a discipline is often an unwelcoming place for women, scholars of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA thinkers and more. And while the lack of inclusivity in philosophy cannot be solved with mere curricular changes, how we *introduce* students to our discipline sends both explicit and implicit messages to students about what philosophy is, who belongs, what kinds of questions philosophy can address, and more. My hope in designing this course was to show students a different vision of who can be a philosopher and what it is that philosophers do.

Budget

The AAPT grant I received allowed me to provide a small honorarium (\$150 each) to four living philosophers who agreed to video conference with my class in the Fall of 2019. The four books and authors were *What Love Is and What it Could Be* by Carrie Jenkins, *The Epistemology of Resistance* by Jose Medina, *How Fascism Works* by Jason Stanley, and *Addressing Ableism* by Jennifer Scuro. Jason Stanley did not want the honorarium payment so I invited additional speakers from L'Arche Chicago--an organization that provides group homes for adults with intellectual disabilities for our final unit on disability. I donated the money that I would have given to Stanley to L'Arche and to Arts of Life, as requested by the L'Arche presenters.

Payee	Amount
Carrie Jenkins	\$150

José Medina	\$150
Jennifer Scuro	\$150
<u>L'Arche Chicago</u>	\$75
<u>Arts of Life</u>	\$75

Course Design

In choosing these authors, my hope was to show students how philosophers are a diverse group of people tackling all kinds of interesting and important problems. For each book, students were encouraged to read the entire book, but to make things more manageable, different students were responsible for carefully reading and taking notes on a specific chapter each week. For each book, students wrote a short paper in which they focused on a specific passage of the text and followed a “they say/I say” format in which they summarized the passage and followed up with a response which I framed in terms of philosophical discussion “moves.” The goal was for students to see philosophy as an active and ongoing conversation in which they could take part as active participants and not just as passive readers. As we discussed each book, we also maintained a shared list of questions for the author so that we were ready when they came with our questions.

Results

From my perspective as a teacher, I found the class to be successful, enjoyable, and exciting for a lot of reasons. The community we created in the class was like almost no other course I’ve taught at the higher ed level. Of course, the course design alone is not the only explanation for this sense of community. The class was an Honors course so students tend to be more open to forming community around academics and the class was smaller. Nevertheless, I found that both students and I were highly engaged and the class was really exciting and enjoyable.

In addition, the students seemed to be more engaged in the reading. Because they knew that they were going to be talking to the authors of the books, they seemed to feel a greater sense of responsibility for getting the authors’ ideas right and making sure that their questions were authentic and well-informed. Because students were actually asking real questions to a real person, coming up with questions was not an empty academic exercise but was part of a genuine philosophical conversation.

In addition to my own impressions, I also gathered some quantitative and qualitative data from my Fall 2019 class in the form of pre and post surveys. While the sample size is small--there

were only 19 students in the class, I think the data indicate that this approach is worth pursuing further.

In the survey, I asked students a number of questions including several questions aimed at uncovering the extent to which their interest in philosophy increased or decreased over the course of the class. In both the pre and post surveys, I asked students the following questions:

- How interested are you in philosophy?
- How likely are you to take more philosophy classes after this class?
- How likely are you to continue studying/reading philosophy on your own after this class?

On a scale of 1-5, I was surprised to find that the average interest in philosophy went **down** slightly on the first two questions but only very slightly by .17 and .14 respectively and the median and the mode stayed the same. What is interesting, however, is that when I disaggregated the data by gender, I found that interest in philosophy for women increased slightly while interest for men decreased. Again, it's important to note that these were very small sample sizes, but the findings were nevertheless, intriguing.

- How interested are you in philosophy?
 - Difference in Average Pre and Post Survey Scores:
 - Women: .49; Men: -.86
- How likely are you to take more philosophy classes after this class?
 - Difference in Average Pre and Post Survey Scores:
 - Women: .82; Men: -1
- How likely are you to continue studying or reading philosophy on your own after this class?
 - Difference in Average Pre and Post Survey Scores:
 - Women: 1.33; Men: -.71

I also tried to disaggregate the data by race and ethnicity but the sample sizes were small, not all students reported their race and ethnicity so I couldn't draw any conclusions from that data.

In addition to asking students about their interest in philosophy, I also asked students what they picture when they imagine a philosopher. In the pre survey, 44% of students named a canonical figure while in the post survey only 17% named a canonical figure. In the post survey, they were unsurprisingly more likely to name one or more of the living philosophers we studied. But perhaps more meaningfully, in their responses in the post survey 22% said that "anyone" could be a philosopher while in the pre-survey only 1 student (5%) said that "anyone" could be a philosopher. The answers in the post survey also showed a shift in students' understanding of

being a philosopher from having a kind of historical or social recognition to an understanding of philosophers as people who think a certain way or ask certain questions.

Another interesting finding is that students had much more to say in the post survey than in the pre survey. For the open ended questions, the average number of words students wrote per question went up for every question asked. There were particularly noticeable jumps in the question: “What should a student do to successfully complete an assigned reading for a class?” and the question: “What should a student do to successfully complete an assigned essay for a class?” In both cases, students wrote on average about 10 more words in their answers in the post survey than in the pre-survey. While definitive conclusions are hard to draw, this may indicate that students gained a better sense of what the work of reading and writing for philosophy classes involves. This is even more striking I think given that we might expect students to be more burned out at the end of the semester.

Finally, I asked students directly in the post survey whether or not talking with the authors impacted how they read and how they wrote for the class. 61% of students reported that it did have an impact on their work in the class.

Conclusions

As I’ve indicated, we have to be cautious about the conclusions that we draw from this data. The sample size is small and I didn’t have any way to make this experiment controlled. Furthermore, there is always the problem of students telling me what they presume I want to hear. Nevertheless, I found this approach to teaching Intro to be highly enjoyable and engaging both for me and for students, and there are indications in the data that this approach may have some impact on helping women to be more interested in philosophy. For that reason and others, I highly recommend this approach to others and look forward to continuing similar efforts in my other classes.