

AAPT Grant for Innovations in Teaching Report: Social Dimensions of Equality

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Design

With the support of the AAPT Grant for Innovations in Teaching, I completed a project assessing whether assigning a group-based project is an engaging and effective means of helping students accomplish institutional and course-specific learning outcomes. A secondary objective was to assess whether assigning the project is *more* effective than the exam I have given in the past.

The project was completed in conjunction with my Spring 2019 course, PHIL2440 – Social Dimensions of Equality at Graceland University, an introduction to social and political philosophy, which satisfies an “Ethical Thinking and Action” learning outcome. The learning outcome requires students to evaluate their own ethical beliefs and meaningfully assess ethical issues from different perspectives. Opportunities to connect course content to current events present themselves often, and students enthusiastically make personal connections to the class. In order to both encourage personal engagement and meet institutional and course goals, I assigned a poster presentation connecting methodology and theories discussed in class to a particular social or political issue. Students worked in groups throughout the semester to identify an issue, evaluate it in terms of the theories we discussed, and propose an ethical course of action in response. Each group created a poster that they presented to their classmates interactively. Students were also encouraged to submit their posters to Scholars’ Showcase, a campus-wide event highlighting student research. The financial support of the AAPT Grant for Innovations in Teaching covered the cost of printing the posters, so students were not responsible for the extra cost of the project.

Past sections of this course involved no group assignments but instead required students to work individually to complete a paper critically evaluating an argument of their choice and an exam that checked for comprehension and application of the final unit of the course. The group project involved the same skills of comprehension, application, and evaluation but was completed over a longer period of time and with more collaborative components. The project also provided more freedom and agency to students; each group was responsible not only to evaluate ethical theories but also to find an issue to apply the theories to. My hopes were, in part, to get students more invested in class content by creating an environment that encouraged personal application.

Objectives and Evaluation Criteria

The overall purpose of the project was to assess whether students meet the institutional and course learning goals through completion of their poster presentations and related tasks. More specifically, the evaluation criteria were threefold:

- to determine whether students created posters that appropriately apply course content to a contemporary social or political issue,
- to check for individual engagement and understanding by having students provide self-assessments and reports prior to the poster's completion and a reflection following their presentation, and
- to evaluate whether the course of action the students recommended was defended reasonably and with sensitivity to objections.

I focused on these criteria because if students apply the content aptly, engage consistently, demonstrate comprehension, and provide a well-reasoned argument, then they accomplish the relevant learning objectives.

Analysis

The data informing my analysis came from three sources: my evaluation of the group projects (especially as they relate to course-specific learning outcomes), students' self-reports in response to the group project, and the formal assessment of institutional learning outcomes. These sources confirmed that assigning a group-based project is an engaging and effective means of helping students accomplish institutional and course-specific learning outcomes.

Evaluation of the Projects with respect to Course-Specific Learning Outcomes:

I evaluated the projects according to a rubric that outlined the main components of the poster presentation: (i) identifying an important social/political issue, (ii) recommending a concrete course of action in response to the issue, (iii) defending that response by appealing to at least three content items discussed in class, (iv) responding to challenges, and (v) professionalism. These rubric criteria reflected the course-specific learning outcomes: learning fundamental principles and theories in social, political, and moral philosophy; gaining a broader understanding and appreciation of philosophy; and learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas and arguments in social, political, and moral philosophy. Along the way, students were evaluated on preliminary tasks such as brainstorming ideas, applying class content, and providing an individual report of their group's issue. The final poster represented a culmination of these preliminary assignments and reflected the work of the group as a whole.

Overall, nearly every group created a poster and gave a corresponding presentation that was satisfactory or exemplary. (One group did not create a satisfactory poster in virtue of failing to follow the instructions regarding the content of the poster, although one of the group members did salvage the presentation portion by offering a thoughtful analysis of their issue.) The class as a whole performed better on the poster presentation than on the paper and exam assigned in previous semesters. There are many possible causes for this: students had more time, students worked together and got feedback from peers, the project was scaffolded and completed in segments, and students received feedback from me on their ideas throughout the process. It is certainly possible to incorporate these elements into a paper and exam, so the fact that the project was a poster presentation may not itself account for the satisfaction of course-specific learning outcomes, but the process as a whole did support satisfaction of the learning outcomes.

Students' Self-Reports:

I asked students to provide self-reports via an anonymous (and IRB-approved) survey following the completion of their poster presentations. Students were asked to report whether they were engaged in class content, whether the project helped them satisfy learning outcomes, and whether they prefer a project overall compared to a paper and exam. Forty-five students completed the survey, and they overwhelmingly reported engagement in the project and the content, and the majority prefer the group project over a paper and exam.

More precisely, 41/45 students indicated that the project helped them engage with ethical thinking. Three students did not answer the question, and only one answered it in the negative. Many indicated that although they already felt strongly about their beliefs about their issue, they found that investigating the issue through multiple angles increased their understanding of both the issue itself and the ethical theories related to it. Several noted that discussions with other students deepened their engagement and investment in their issue.

Slightly fewer students, 38/45, said that they would rather do the group project than a paper and exam. Three didn't answer the question, one was ambivalent, and three would've preferred a paper and exam over the project. Those who would've preferred a paper and exam offered different reasons: one doesn't like giving presentations, one doesn't like group work, and another said that the project was too large and spread out. Those who would prefer the group project often noted that they appreciated the freedom of choosing their own topic, the opportunity to work with others, the fact that it was *not* an exam, and the ability to learn from other students' projects. Several also noted that it was active, engaging, and helped them apply class content outside of class.

I was pleasantly surprised by how many students explicitly prefer a group project over a paper and exam and was even happier to see so many students report their engagement and learning. Though not unanimous, my students on the whole reported that the project was engaging and effective, and many even went so far as to say that it was fun.

Formal Assessment of Institutional Learning Outcomes:

Social Dimensions of Equality, among other courses, satisfies the Ethical Thinking and Action learning outcome of our Essential Education program at Graceland University. The institution is responsible for formally assessing the satisfaction of this learning outcome, so I incorporated this formal assessment into my project to see if there was a meaningful difference between the Spring 2019 semester (with the group project) and the Spring 2018 semester (without the group project).

There are two main criteria for the Ethical Thinking and Action learning outcome:

- Students should be able to identify their own ethical beliefs and reasons for those beliefs.
- Learning diverse ethical perspectives and/or frameworks, students will
 - explain the dimensions of an ethical issue and
 - consider the outcomes of ethical action based on decision-making and action informed by ethical perspectives or frameworks, evaluating these in light of the worth of persons, and/or values of community, justice, and/or the common good.

In the Spring 2018 sections of Social Dimensions of Equality, 38/42 students satisfied the first outcome, and 36/42 satisfied the second outcome. In the Spring 2019 sections of Social Dimensions of Equality, 47/50 students satisfied the first outcome, and 40/50 satisfied the second. Overall, since

these are not large numbers of students, I was not surprised when the difference between semesters was not significant. Therefore, the assessment data does not support the claim that assigning a group project is *more* effective than a paper and exam, but it is consistent with the claim that assigning a group project is *an* effective means of satisfying the institutional learning outcomes. Through the formal assessment, I observed that the main reason that students did *not* satisfy the outcome was failing to submit the relevant assignment. Since students need to be evaluated individually to complete assessment (rather than as a group), I assigned an individual complement to the poster presentation that required students to offer their personal analysis of their issue and their group's preferred response. Many students did not complete it, and I plan to emphasize its importance in the future.

Conclusion

Based on my evaluation of the poster presentations, students' self-reports, and formal assessment, I conclude that assigning group projects is an engaging and effective means of helping students accomplish institutional and course-specific learning outcomes. I plan to continue to assign group projects for some of my courses to invite students into active engagement and personal investment in class content.

In particular, some aspects of the group project seemed especially valuable. Students had the freedom to choose issues that interested them and engaged other students in discussion. The project itself was very scaffolded, and students worked individually and in groups to work toward a final goal. The process was interactive, and students got feedback from each other and from me to polish and refine their projects. The presentations themselves were also fun and interactive; they allowed students to learn from each other and engage with ideas together. This course in particular was especially conducive to the project, since most students can find entry points by looking to issues of equality and inequality in contemporary society.

Some aspects of the group project would benefit from refinement. Some students reported frustration with group members who were perceived to not be contributing equally. In following semesters, I required more individual components. For instance, rather than having groups brainstorm all together and generate a proposal, I first had students individually come up with a list of issues that interested them. Then, when groups came together, each student had their list to draw on, and groups narrowed down ideas together based on common interest. Later, when students needed apply class content to their issues, students were individually assigned different content items to analyze and report to their groups. This, I suspect, increased individual responsibility. I was also somewhat disappointed that no groups elected to present their posters at the campus-wide Scholars' Showcase event. I incentivized this by allowing students to skip a later writing assignment if they presented at Scholars' Showcase, but I wonder if this was not incentive enough. I am considering making this a requirement in the future, or at least offering a greater incentive.

On the whole, the group poster presentations were engaging and effective. I am grateful to the AAPT for support of this project, and I am happy to report that the project was a success. I look forward to sharing further insights with the community of Philosophy teachers at the (postponed) Biennial Workshop-Conference in 2021. My accepted session, 'Should You Assign Group Projects in Philosophy Courses?' will expand on this analysis and invite participants into discussion about the efficacy of group projects.