Using Interview Projects in the Teaching of Philosophy

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Overview

• Setting
• Goals
• Methods
• Results
• Lessons Learned
• Exercise
• Questions
Setting

- St. Joseph's College in Patchogue NY
- Four year undergraduate college
- Suburban commuter college
- Department of Philosophy
  - No Philosophy Major but a recently registered major in Philosophy and Religious Studies
Courses

Wendy C. Turgeon

- Philosophy and Women course: 18 students, all years
- Aesthetics course: 12 students, all years
- Twice a week daytime classes

Michael L. McClain

- Introduction to Ethics: 26 students, all years
- Once a week evening class
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McClain: Goals for Students

• Better appreciate ‘real life’ implications of ethical theory

• Gain broader perspective
  • Avoid dogmatism
  • Avoid sense of ‘anything goes’

• Enhance ability to articulate ethical principles in conversation and in writing

• Better understand importance of coherence in ethical thought
McClain: Method

- Each student selected a ‘thoughtful and ethical’ person to interview
- Contracted with the person to conduct three interviews
- Interviewed person using a set of questions developed by the instructor
- Reported results in group discussions, formal presentation, and in paper
McClain: Method

- Big questions
  - How is the world organized and what can we know about it?
  - How should we understand human life?
  - How do you make important decisions?
  - What are your ethical principles?
McClain: Method

- Students reported on interviews in weekly group discussions
  - Relatively thoughtful and respectful sharing of ideas
  - Various levels of sophistication and participation
  - Wide range of views expressed

- Students submitted three written reports
  - Reports due two weeks after interview
  - Final cumulative report, integrating all three interviews
  - Comments on each draft
McClain: Method

• Each student gave formal oral presentation
  • Summarized interviews
  • Most were nervous, resistant

• Grade for project included
  • Progress in writing paper
  • Quality of involvement in class discussions
  • Quality of final paper and presentation
    • Content and style