Blogging as Practice in Applied Philosophy

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Abstract: In the past decade, several professors have advocated for the use of blogs in undergraduate courses in philosophy, arguing that blogs are beneficial for student learning, as blogs are forums for student collaboration and engagement with course material outside the classroom. In this paper I argue that blogging assignments can be beneficial for introductory-level undergraduate courses in philosophy for two reasons yet to be fully explored in the pedagogical literature. First, blogging assignments can act as low-stakes practice for paper writing. Second, blogging assignments give students the freedom to explore the relevance of course content to real world problems and academic fields other than philosophy. I then provide an example of a blogging assignment from a course in applied political philosophy that, I argue, achieves both of these goals.

I. Introduction

A blog is an online forum in which one or multiple authors can add or "post" content, including original written material, videos, photos, or references to outside works. A blog can be private, such that the blog's content is accessible to a particular person or group only, or publicly accessible to anyone with internet access. In the past ten years, several professors have advocated for the use of blogs in undergraduate courses in philosophy, arguing that blogs are beneficial for student learning because blogs are forums for student collaboration and engagement with course material (Long 2010; Churchill 2009).

Here, I argue that blogging assignments can be beneficial for introductory-level undergraduate courses in philosophy for two reasons that have received little attention in the pedagogical literature in philosophy. First, blogging assignments can act as low-stakes practice for paper writing. Through structured blogging exercises, students can develop the skills necessary to write full-length philosophy essays. Second, blogging assignments give students the freedom to explore

the relevance of course content to real world problems and academic fields other than philosophy. In particular, blogging assignments give students an opportunity to make connections between course content and issues and topics that they find interesting and important. I argue that both of these features of blogging assignments are essential for student learning. I then provide an example of a blogging assignment from a course in applied political philosophy that, I argue, can act as low-stakes practice for paper writing and simultaneously give students room to explore connections between course material and issues of importance to students. I conclude by discussing some avenues for future research, including the prospect of tracking the effects of blogging for student learning in future courses.

II. Undergraduate Philosophy Courses and Blogging

Course instructors have implemented blogging assignments for a variety of purposes in undergraduate philosophy courses. In this section, I provide an overview of the current literature on student blogging in philosophy, and identify the main reasons why blogs are used. I also explain the most widely discussed benefits of blogging, and the problems instructors and students have faced in designing and completing course blogging assignments.

What Purposes Do Blogs Serve?

Course instructors use blogs to achieve a variety of course objectives. When courses are designed to promote classroom discussion, instructors can use blogs to promote discussion outside of class (Long 2010). Instructors can also use blogs to track and enhance student learning for specific course material. For example, when students engage with difficult texts, instructors can ask students to blog about their reading assignments in order to identify any misunderstandings before class beings (Skipper 2011). In addition, asking students to blog about course content can enhance students' appreciation for and understanding of philosophy (Zanelotti 2011), and facilitate social, cooperative learning (Long 2010; Kohen 2014).

In practice, instructors have used blogs to replace more traditional written assignments. While many philosophy instructors require their students to write essays, some instructors have been used blogs as a substitute for paper writing (TeachPhilosophy101 2011). Blogs can act as forums in which students can practice their writing, and it has been argued that students are more willing to explore their own ideas and take risks when blogging than they are willing to do in essay writing (Trott 2016). Below, I will expand on this idea, and argue that blogging

is beneficial because blogs are forums in which students can practice applying course concepts to real world problems.

What Are the Benefits of Using Course Blogs?

On a practical level, course blogs make it easier for students to engage with their classmates outside of class, as students are able to post their own thoughts or reply to others at any time or place, so long as they have an internet connection (Krause 2005; Long 2010). In other words, blogs allow students to discuss course content without meeting in person (Churchill 2009), which makes it easier for students to participate in courses outside of class meetings. Holbo (2011) argues that requiring students to post frequently to a course blog cultivates good learning habits, and generates a participative, active learning attitude. All of these features can be beneficial for student learning. Online course sites like blogs, wikis, and websites are also beneficial for course instructors who wish to easily organize a large volume of course materials and make those materials available to students (Holbo 2011).

What Problems Do Instructors Face when Designing and Implementing Blogging Assignments?

Course instructors must structure blogging assignments carefully in order to achieve course learning objectives. A particular problem arises when blogging assignments lack concrete instructions, or when instructors' expectations for students are not made clear. When students are told to contribute to a course blog over the course of a semester, but are not given any specific instructions about what to write, how much to write, or how often they ought to write, some students may participate very infrequently, or contribute very little. Instructors cannot instruct students to simply "comment" or "post" whatever and whenever they like and expect to cultivate an online forum in which all students participate regularly (TeachPhilosophy101 2011).

For this reason, instructors who desire a particular level of student participation, or particular kinds of blog contributions, should provide concrete instructions to students, and perhaps provide a clear rubric of the instructor's expectations (Krause 2005). This is particularly important if a goal of the blogging exercise is to increase dialogue between students outside of class. If students are not instructed to engage with one another's blog posts, but are only instructed to post *something*, students may only post their own ideas and pay little attention to what others have written (Krause 2005). For these reasons, blogging assignments must be designed carefully, and generally require a series of instructions to help students navigate the assignment.

On the other hand, too much structure may stifle student expression and exploration of course material on the blog. If students are given too many "rules" about what to write or how to write, they may feel that their freedom of expression is limited, and in response, may simply write whatever they think the instructor wants them to write. This is particularly problematic if one of the purposes of the assignment is to have students produce novel work on the blog, such as crafting their own arguments, or exploring avenues of philosophical research not discussed in class (as opposed to recapitulating arguments from assigned readings, for example). For this reason, a blogging assignment that aims to generate novel content should allow students to explore new ideas (or, as was noted above, take risks) while providing enough instruction for students to complete the assignment successfully. As I will argue below, I believe that such a balance is possible if one's goal is to have students explore the relationships between course materials and external but related topics that are of interest to students.

What Problems Do Students Face when Completing Blogging Assignments?

As noted, the design and structure of blogging assignments is critical for student success. While this may mean more work for the instructor when designing the assignment, in my experience students welcome concrete instructions and clear expectations from the instructor. They appreciate knowing exactly what they are being asked to do, and when they are expected to have completed the assignment. Vague instructions and instructor expectations can frustrate students and distract from the overall goals of the assignment.

There are four additional issues that students face when blogging. The first two issues concern the online website or platform on which the blog is built. First, students may have difficulty learning how to use the blogging tool if they are not already familiar with the blogging website or platform. Fortunately, several popular online course management tools such as Blackboard come equipped with blogging functions, such that students can participate in course blogs on the course's main website.

The second issue concerns student privacy. Some students may not feel comfortable publishing their work on a public blog (Arts ISIT [no date]). Even if students are allowed to adopt a pseudonym under which to post, they may nevertheless be uncomfortable posting their ideas on a public site. Further, FERPA requires that certain student information, such as their grades, not be published without their consent. For this reason, it is important to identify a safe, legal platform for blogging that will adequately protect students' privacy. For my own purposes,

I have chosen to design student blogging assignments on my university's approved course management website, as this website meets the university and federal government's standards for student privacy.

The third issue arises when students are asked to respond to one another's work. If students' individual work relies on other students having posted blog entries, students may be unable to complete their task if fellow classmates fail to do their part. This is a common and unfortunate feature of group work, and one that may arise if blogs are structured to intertwine the work of several students. For this reason, it is important to have a plan in place in the event that one student fails to do his or her work, such that the work and grades of the other class members do not suffer as a result. Below, I provide an example of a group blogging assignment, and explain the contingency plan I created in the event that one or more group members failed to contribute their assigned work.

The final issue regarding student blogging concerns the relevance of the blog to class meetings. If blogging tasks are assigned as homework for a course that meets in person one or several days a week, but the course blog is never discussed during class time, the discussions held in class may seem disconnected from what is going on in the course blog and vice versa. This is true for all types of homework: if homework is not discussed in class, it can seem distant from what happens in the classroom, especially if the homework assignment is not a direct recapitulation of the classroom discussion or lecture. For students to understand how their blogging builds on course material discussed in class, instructors should incorporate the work that is done on the blogs in class. This has the added advantage of signaling to students that the blogging assignment isn't simply busywork; it contributes to their learning, even during classroom discussions (Paulu and Darby 1998).

Further Benefits to be Explored

As we have seen, blogs can serve a variety of purposes, and can have a variety of benefits for student learning. In the next two sections, I argue that blogging assignments, if designed properly, can have two additional benefits for students that have yet to be discussed at length in the literature outlined above. I then explain a particular blogging assignment that, I argue, achieves these two benefits and promotes an engaging and collaborative learning atmosphere, while avoiding several of the problems associated with blogging that I have just described.

III. The Significance of Assignment Scaffolding

The first benefit of blogging that I wish to discuss is that blogging assignments can act as low-stakes writing practice for course essays.

This kind of practice is particularly helpful for undergraduates who have had little or no experience writing philosophy essays or long-form written assignments (Bean 2001: 96; Wingate, Andon, and Cogo 2011). Assignment scaffolding, or the practice of organizing course assignments to build up students' abilities over time, has significant support in the pedagogy literature (Bodrova and Leong 1998; Bruner 1996; Ambrose et al. 2010). When course activities and assignments are scaffolded, students are able to conquer complex tasks independently that they were previously unable to do on their own (Vygotsky 1980), thus enhancing students' abilities to complete course assignments and achieve learning goals autonomously.

For example, suppose that an undergraduate philosophy course requires students to write an essay in which they critique an ethical theory discussed in class. To successfully complete this essay, students must be able to do several smaller written tasks. For example, they must be able to explain the chosen theory in their own words. They must be able to create an original argument critiquing the theory. And they must do each of these tasks using language that is clear and precise, and an organizational structure that is easy to follow. As instructors, we must recognize that students who are new to philosophy may not be immediately equipped to do each of these tasks well, and may need guidance in the essay planning and writing process to produce good written work. We must recognize that the students are novices in writing philosophy papers.

As an instructor, one can design course blogs to practice these tasks before students write an independent essay. Extending the example just described, a course instructor could require students to practice explaining theories discussed in class in short blogging assignments, commenting and critiquing one another's posts to identify areas that require clarification and revision. Instructors can (and indeed, should) provide feedback on the clarity and organization of the blog posts, explaining to students how they can improve their writing in the future. Then, when it comes time to write an essay with a similar goal (explaining and critiquing a theory), students have had significant practice writing the necessary components of the essay, and have improved their essay design and writing skills.

In the example just described, the instructor is "scaffolding" course assignments to improve students' writing skills. The instructor initially assigns blogging work, and provides specific instructions as to what the students should do in their posts. The instructor then provides her own feedback, so that the student will be better able to complete a similar task on her own the next time she is asked to do so. Once this process of "building" one's writing skills is complete, the teacher removes all of her support (her "scaffolding"), and asks each student to write an

essay independently, without help from the instructor. Importantly, this strategy will only be successful if the skills that students are practicing in their blogging exercises are the same skills they will be asked to use in writing an essay (such as explaining a theory before providing an original critique). For this reason, instructors must be intentional in their course design, and ensure that the skills students will develop while blogging will be transferable and applicable to essay writing contexts (Ambrose et al. 2010: 107–20).[1]

IV. The Significance of Content Application

Integrating blogging assignments into undergraduate philosophy courses has the additional benefit of allowing students to explore the application of course content to real world problems and academic disciplines outside of philosophy. In this section, I provide three reasons why practicing the application of course content is beneficial for philosophy novices.

First, structured blogging assignments that seek to apply course concepts to real world problems can increase student autonomy in the classroom. If a course aims to help students understand how to apply course concepts to real world issues or other academic disciplines, instructors can allow students to select applications that students find interesting and important. Student interest and engagement in course content has been shown to be critical for students to achieve course goals (Deci et al. 1991). In the blogging assignment example below, students are asked to explore the notion of "political equality" as it is promoted (or thwarted) by contemporary public policies in the United States. In this example, students are given a list of possible topics they might explore, but are ultimately free to choose a policy or topic that they find interesting. In this case, students have the freedom to craft their own understanding of the course content and its relevance to real world problems.

While encouraging student autonomy is desirable in its own right, it has the additional benefit of motivating students to become more engaged with the course material. Instructors promote engagement when they give their students room to explore how the activities they are doing and the goals toward which they are working have value for their own lives (Ambrose et al. 2010). Increasing student ownership of course content in this way can help ensure that students are intrinsically motivated to engage with the course readings and assignments, and not simply motivated by the desire to receive an "A" grade (Green 2015: 54–56). In this sense, increasing student autonomy is important not just for student success on paper assignments (such as the assignment discussed above), but for any kind of graded assignment students as asked to complete.

Second, incorporating blogging assignments that explore the connections between philosophical course content and other academic disciplines and contemporary issues can increase inclusivity in the philosophy classroom. At a time when many philosophy instructors seek to make their classrooms more inclusive of students of diverse backgrounds, allowing students to blog about topics that are important to them is one way to signal to students that their ideas, interests, and experiences are legitimate and should play a role in their education. Empowering students to think critically about topics that they believe are important is a significant upshot of integrating blogging assignments into philosophy courses.

Third, of late there have been several calls for philosophers to consider more deeply the relationship between their work and the world outside of philosophy. For example, it has been argued that philosophy has too little impact on STEM fields and society at large, because philosophers tend to engage only with other philosophers (Briggle, Frodeman, and Holbrook 2015). To alleviate this, a philosopher could explore the connections between philosophy, other academic disciplines, and society at large with her students. She might ask her students, for example, how the course's content relates to current events. Structured blogging assignments can help students explore the answer to this question over the course of a semester. Allowing students to explore the relevance of course content to other academic disciplines and world events is a small step towards improving philosophy's impact.

Thus far, I have argued that blogging assignments can give students a forum in which to practice their writing in preparation for course papers, and give students space to explore the application of course concepts to topics of interest to them, both of which are critical for success in the political theory classroom. As was discussed above, professors must design their blogging assignments carefully in order to achieve each of these goals. In the next section, I provide an example of a blogging assignment for a course in applied political philosophy that, I argue, achieves both of these goals while avoiding the potential downsides of blogging assignments discussed above.

V. Example: Blogging about Political Equality

The assignment I describe here is a blogging assignment designed for an introductory-level course in applied political philosophy with twenty-one students. The central topic of the course was "political equality in democratic decision making." Nightly course readings surveyed various interpretations of the concept "political equality," and explored the intrinsic and instrumental value of democratic deliberation and voting. The primary course objective, and the course objective that

will be the focus on this section, was for students to be able to use the normative ethical and political theories discussed in class to evaluate contemporary public policies in the United States.

The class met for fifty minutes every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Class discussions served to explain and analyze the content from course readings. In class, students were asked to distill the main findings of the daily readings in their own words, and compare and contrast various interpretations of "political equality" and "democratic representation" presented in the readings. In addition, I asked students to explore the feasibility and implications of those terms for various policies (for example, "how should the voting system be structured to achieve political equality? Would it be feasible to implement such a voting system in the United States?"). I implemented a course blogging assignment that served as a transitional assignment between classroom discussion and independent course papers. In classroom discussions, students worked as a group to discuss and analyze course concepts. There was no specific requirement as to what each student should contribute to each discussion; all that was required was that students participate. In course essays, students worked alone to develop original arguments analyzing public policies. In order to develop the skills necessary for paper writing, I asked students to blog throughout the semester, working in small groups to develop an original ethical analysis. The blogging assignment, like class discussions and course papers, was focused on applying course concepts to public policies that the students chose.

I structured the blogging assignment as follows. During the first week of class, I divided students into groups of three.[2] After a brief introduction to the concept of political equality, I asked each group to select an American public policy being debated in the current presidential election that the group believed influences Americans' equality in political decision making. I provided the students with a list of example policies they could choose from, and group members worked together to select a policy that they were interested in learning more about. For example, students chose to study income inequality, equality in education, the structure of the Electoral College and presidential elections, immigration policy, and campaign finance reform, because they believed that these topics were relevant to political equality in the United States.

In the first blogging assignment, each group explained its chosen policy. After the first post, I asked the groups to produce three blog posts (one per group member) every two weeks. There were three kinds of blog posts. First, one group member wrote a "primary post," in which the student analyzed the group's policy topic using the understandings of political equality and/or democratic representation

discussed in class during the previous two weeks. Recall that the course readings and discussions surveyed, compared, and contrasted different interpretations of these terms, giving the students the content necessary to provide analyses of their policy topic from several competing perspectives throughout the semester. Primary posts were due on Monday evenings. By the following Wednesday evening, another student in the group was responsible for posting a "response post," in which the student extended the primary post's analysis by providing original support, or critiqued the primary post. The following Friday, the blogging groups met during class and recounted to one another the blog's findings for the week, and decided what aspect of their policy they wished to explore in the next set of posts. The remaining group member recorded and posted the group's main conclusions for that week to the blog, and noted what the group was (tentatively) planning to write about in the next set of posts. Over the course of the semester, students were encouraged to narrow their focus to explain and analyze the particular aspects of their chosen policies, thus practicing their application of course concepts while learning about a policy that the group found interesting and important.

Work was divided equally among the group members. I required each student to write two primary posts, two response posts, and two conclusion posts throughout the semester. Beyond these requirements, the substance of the blog posts and distribution of responsibilities was largely left up to the students. Groups had to provide a schedule showing which group member would be responsible for each post, and I expected the students to follow that schedule throughout the semester. From my perspective, the specific content of each post was not of great concern, so long as students were working to provide an original analysis of their policy topic using course concepts discussed in the previous two weeks of class. So long as students were making an effort to use the new concepts they had learned, I considered the week's posts to be successful.

Students received three kinds of feedback throughout the blogging process. First, students provided verbal feedback to one another during Friday course meetings, discussing one another's posts from that week, and in particular, raising questions, concerns, and identifying avenues for future research.[3] Second, I posted group-level feedback on each blog, suggesting how the group might proceed in the next set of posts, or identifying some questions left unanswered. Third, I provided feedback to each student privately. This feedback identified conceptual issues in the student's post, pointed out assumptions or claims that required further justification, and in particular, gave advice as to how the student could improve the organization and style of their writing going forward with a particular eye toward paper writing.

For example, in their first primary post, many students failed to fully explain the interpretation of political equality that they were using to analyze their policy topic. This was noted in their personal feedback, and I told students that I expected them to review and incorporate that feedback into their next post.

It should be noted that the structure and purpose of the blogging assignment were transparent to students. In particular, I told the students that blogging served to help them practice designing and writing philosophical arguments and analyses. Thus the scaffolded nature of course readings and discussions, blogging, and essays was made known to the students at the start of the class. This kind of transparency is important, because it demonstrates to students that each assignment plays a particular role in their learning, and is not merely a case of "busywork."

Additional Benefits of the Blogging Assignment

In addition to improving assignment scaffolding and increasing student autonomy, this assignment also improved the classroom atmosphere. By discussing blogs together in class every other Friday, students were able to share their research and their ethical analyses with the class. This made the blogging assignment something more than merely homework; it was consistently a point of classroom discussion. In classroom discussions, students felt comfortable referring to their blogging work, even on days that were not devoted to blogging. When broken into their blogging groups to participate in small group discussions during class, all students participated, and seemed to feel comfortable voicing their opinions with their established blogging groups. Throughout their interactions with one another, students worked cooperatively, and even offered to fill in their group mates on what they missed when absent from class. For these reasons, I believe that this assignment contributed positively to classroom discussions.

Above I argued that the blogging component of the course helped students take some autonomous control over their learning, because it allowed students to explore connections between course content and policies of interest to them. One might question whether holding blogging discussions once every two weeks (or once every six class meetings for a course that meets three days per week), was sufficient to promote student engagement. Future research should attempt to determine the level of autonomous engagement with material that is required for students to succeed. For my part, I scheduled blogging discussions once every two weeks for two reasons. First, I wanted ensure that students did not have to blog every single week of the course because I thought that would be too demanding a schedule for them (and for me), but I nevertheless wanted blogging to be a regular

part of their course experience. Second, devoting more class meetings to blogging discussion would have decreased the number of days remaining to cover essential course material (such as discussions of the concept of "political equality"). While the schedule I propose worked for me and my students, I encourage instructors interested in using course blogs to find a schedule that works for them.

One might also question whether the benefits I discussed above could be achieved by meeting with students for extra class hours, or through another type of written assignment.[4] Finding additional class hours to meet to discuss course topics would not have been feasible given the number of students I was working with, as they all had different (and likely conflicting) course schedules. Further, more in-class time devoted to discussion would not have provided students with the kind of practice that I was interested in: practice in writing.

It certainly possible that a different kind of written assignment could have helped students see the relevance of course material to contemporary ethical and political issues while promoting student autonomy. For example, one could assign this blogging assignment as a term paper that students complete individually, perhaps in segments over the course of the semester. In this case, each student would work by herself throughout the semester to research public policy and apply course content to it. The students could turn in component parts or drafts of the paper to the instructor for feedback, or participate in peer review during class time.

While the individual assignment I have just described may sound quite similar to the blogging assignment I am proposing, I believe that there are three important differences between them. First, implementing the blogging assignment online allows the instructor to facilitate discussion between students without having to keep track of physical copies of their work. This can be helpful when an instructor or teaching assistant is reviewing several blogs at once. Second, the blogging assignment may require less grading than the written individual assignment just described. In particular, if the term paper assignment requires as much research and writing as the blogging assignment, each student will have to complete the same amount of work under the term paper assignment as a group of three would produce under the blogging assignment. This would result in significantly more work for the instructor. Third, making the assignment a group assignment allows students to receive feedback from multiple perspectives: from the instructor, and from her group mates. When instructors work to ensure that their students are prepared to give quality feedback (by providing them with a rubric, for example), I believe that this feedback can be helpful and constructive.

Avoiding Blogging Pitfalls for Instructors

Above I noted several issues that instructors may face in designing and implementing blogging assignments. First, there is a concern that when blogging assignments lack concrete instructions, or the instructor's expectations for student participation on blogs are unclear, students may post infrequently or write very little. To avoid this problem in the blogging assignment explained above, I required each student to complete the same number of blog posts over the course of the semester, and provided clear, thorough instructions for the assignment at the beginning of the course.

While too little structure is problematic for blogging assignments, too much structure may stifle student expression and exploration of course material on the blog. To avoid this problem, I gave students significant freedom to write about (a) policy topics that they chose as a group and (b) the relationships that they saw between course concepts and their policy topics. There were no specific connections between policies and course content that students were expected to make. All I required was that students connect their policy topic to the concepts discussed throughout the semester. While this may seem vague to students at the beginning of the semester, through brainstorming with their group members and with assistance from the instructor, students were able to successfully complete the assignment.

An additional concern that an instructor may have regarding this particular assignment is the significant time investment required to successfully design and complete the assignment. While previous courses I have taught included three essay assignments, this course included two essays plus the blogging assignment. In my experience, designing the blogging assignment, writing instructions and rubrics, and monitoring student progress took more time that writing an essay prompt, and likely took more time to grade over the course of a semester than grading an essay. Explaining the assignment to students and providing time in class once every two weeks to discuss blogs reduces the amount of time that can be spent on discussions of course readings. However, by allowing students to take time to discuss their work in class and receive feedback from peers and the instructor, students felt that the blogging assignment and the subsequent feedback they received contributed positively to their learning. I discuss this and other feedback from students below.

While this assignment does have benefits for student learning and avoids some of the common issues associated with blogging (which I discuss in greater detail below), I do recognize that this amount of planning and grading will not be feasible for instructors who teach large classes without grading assistance from a co-instructor or teaching assistant. This is especially true if the instructor is juggling several

courses at once. While rubrics facilitate efficient grading, one must be prepared to provide feedback to each group every two weeks, which may not be possible for large, lecture-style courses with many students.

Avoiding Potential Issues for Student Bloggers

Above I noted that there are four main obstacles that students face when blogging in philosophy courses. The first two issues concerned the online website or platform on which the blog is built: students may have difficulty learning how to use the blogging tool if they are not already familiar with the blogging website, and students may not feel comfortable blogging if the blog is public. To avoid both of these issues, I implemented the course blog on my university's approved course management site Blackboard. This site protects student work, which can only be viewed by those inside the class, and is regularly used by students in courses across the university. The students had little difficulty navigating the easy-to-use blogging feature of the site, as they were already quite familiar with Blackboard, and were given a short demonstration of the blogging portion of the site during the first week of class.

Students face a third issue in *group* blogging projects in particular. In the assignment described above, the student responsible for the "response post" can only do her job if the student responsible for the "primary post" has done her part. In the event that the primary poster did not do her job, I had a contingency plan for the group. First, I monitored the group blogs throughout the week, and made note of any blogs that were missing primary posts. I would then instruct the group's response poster to simply brainstorm topics that the group might explore next time, and post that information on the blog as her response post. While this is clearly not the intended purpose of the response post, it gives the response and conclusion posters something to discuss and contribute, and gives them a head start on their work for next time. I should note that while negligence is a serious concern when designing and executing group projects, my class had only one instance in which a student failed to post her primary post. Students, in general, took their responsibilities seriously, and did their part.[5]

An additional concern one might have is that this assignment appears to be a great deal of work for students. While I do not have a baseline average amount of work required for philosophy courses in general to which I can compare the amount of time and energy required in my course, I can say two things to address this concern. First, in my course development, the blogging assignment replaced an individual essay assignment, and required that students do lower-stakes work over a longer period of time, which may be less difficult and stressful for students than a mid-term essay. Second, the instructor can craft

the blogging assignment to her students' skill level. If, for example, the instructor believes that her students would be able to write two five-hundred word primary posts over the course of the semester and do them well, but that a longer assignment would be too difficult for them, she can use that word length in her assignment instructions. In other words, instructors can gauge students' skills at the beginning of the semester, and design their blogging assignments to meet students at their current skill level.

The final issue that student bloggers face concerns the relevance of the blog to class meetings. As I noted above, if blogs are assigned as homework, but are never discussed during class meetings, class discussions may seem very disconnected from the blogging exercises. I attempted to avoid this problem by setting aside one class every two weeks to discuss the blogs in class.

Integrating the blogging assignment into course meetings contributed to the success of the assignment. Blogging discussions gave students time to ask the instructor questions about the assignment, and gave the instructor time to check in with each group to see how they were progressing. When time allowed, groups would share their findings with the class as a whole. Because everyone was working from the same set of course concepts covered in nightly readings and class discussions, it was fairly easy for groups to discuss their findings with the class, even though each group was working on a distinct policy topic. Ultimately, discussing the blogs in class on a regular basis helped me track my students' progress, and gave students time to reflect on the past work, and organize and plan their future posts. Anecdotally, students said that they appreciated having time in class to discuss their blogs. In the next section, I present more concrete results regarding students' experiences with the blogging assignment.

VI. Results and Future Studies

Overall, I believe that the blogging assignment was a success. Because this was my first experience using blogs in the classroom, and because I did not have a large class size or multiple sections of the same class on which to "experiment," I was not able to track student learning in a scientifically sound way for this iteration of the assignment. In the future, instructors interested in studying the effects of blogging for student learning should seek to compare students' ability to apply course concepts to real world issues between groups that complete blogging assignments and course essays, and groups that complete only course essays.

While I was not able to track the objective effects of blogging for student learning, I did ask students to participate in an optional, anony-

mous exit survey that asked about students' subjective experiences with the blogging assignment. The survey consisted of multiple choice questions, plus a space to provide additional (anonymous) feedback. The multiple choice portion of the survey and survey results can be viewed in the Appendix. Sixteen of the twenty[6] students participated in the survey. Overall, 87.5 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the blogging assignment contributed to their learning. The same proportion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the blogging assignment served as good practice for essay writing. All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the blogging assignment helped them learn how to apply course concepts to contemporary political problems. Finally, all students agreed or strongly agreed that they were glad that the assignment was incorporated into their coursework. Based on these results alone, I believe that the assignment was a worthwhile addition to the course, and plan to use this and similar blogging assignments in my introductory philosophy classes going forward.

Appendix[7]

Total class size: 20; Total respondents: 16

Question	Percentage of Respondents				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Compared to other courses, in this course I am learning much more.	0	56.25	37.5	0	6.25
Overall in this course, blogging facilitated and contributed to my learning.	43.75	43.75	12.5	0	0
Due to class blogs, I felt an important part of our classroom environment.	37.5	50.0	12.5	0	0
Due to the blogging component in this course the instructor was involved in supporting my learning more than instructors in other courses.	31.25	50.0	18.75	0	0
I felt that the blogging assignment instructions were clear.	43.75	43.75	12.5	0	0
I felt that the blogging assignment was well-organized and easy to follow throughout the semester.	56.25	31.25	6.25	6.25	0
I felt that my blog posts were graded fairly.	62.5	37.5	0	0	0
The blogging assignment helped me learn how to apply course concepts to contemporary political problems.	62.5	37.5	0	0	0
The blogging assignment served as good practice for writing course essays.	31.25	56.25	6.25	6.25	0
Overall, I am glad that the blogging assignment was incorporated into our coursework.	50.0	50.0	0	0	0

	Accessing and reading posts from other classmates	Receiving comments from classmates about my posting	Receiving comments from the instructor about my posting
The following from blogging contributed to my learning (please select all that apply).	75.0	56.25	93.75

Notes

1. In the example I give below, both the blogging and course paper assignments asked students to explain a public policy in which they were interested, and apply course concepts to that policy in order to evaluate it. In particular, students were asked to apply the concept of political equality.

2. Of course, if your class size is not a multiple of three, you must make adjustments. After one student dropped my course, we were left with one group of two students. For that group, group member A would write a primary post, group member B would write a response post, and then either group member would write a conclusion post. Ultimately, every student in the class was responsible for the same amount of work: two primary posts, two response posts, and two conclusion posts.

3. One might be concerned that novice writers cannot be expected to make meaningful comments and critiques of one another's work. To this end, I spent time during the first blogging discussion of the semester to discuss the kinds of feedback that are constructive and helpful to one another. This is part lecture, and part discussion in which students can explain the kinds of commentary they would find appropriate and helpful. I would suggest that instructors interested in this sort of assignment provide their students with a rubric (or, work with their students to construct a rubric) to help them evaluate one another's work. This rubric can be similar to the rubric the instructor uses in her own evaluation of the students' work, but need not be exactly the same if the instructor believes that students are not yet able to provide that level of feedback. I thank a helpful anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for posing this important question.

5. It is possible that because students belonged to the same group throughout the semester, students felt a stronger sense of responsibility toward the group than if the groups changed from week to week. This is an aspect of blogging assignments that deserves further study.

6. While the course began with twenty-one students, one student dropped the course halfway through the semester, resulting in twenty students.

7. Many of these survey questions are presented in Daniel Churchill's article "Educational Applications of Web 2.0: Using Blogs to Support Teaching and Learning" (Churchill 2009).

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