

Mellon Initiative Course Revision Grant Report

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I received a Mellon Initiative Course Revision Grant to develop assignments for a special seminar on the philosophy of the performing arts offered in Fall 2014. The course was designed for senior philosophy majors, who are required to take one seminar to complete the major. Our seminars have a prerequisite of six upper-division hours in Philosophy, thus by the time students take a seminar they have had significant experience doing philosophical research. However, they are often unaware of how professional philosophers share their work with others and develop their ideas in response to peer review. I thus designed a series of assignments aimed at enabling the students to model development of their own research in these ways on first-hand experience of professional philosophers doing the same thing.

The assignments were developed, like the course itself, to take advantage of a unique opportunity: In late October, the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics (ASA) was held in San Antonio. This is the premier conference for philosophy of the arts in the English-speaking world. I was local-arrangements chair, and Trinity University was the host institution. This was thus a unique opportunity to expose our Philosophy majors to how professionals in the field present their research, critically discuss the research of their peers, and further develop their research in response to their peers' critical discussion.

In advance of the conference, we discussed selected works on topics, and by people, on the conference program. Students were required to attend six hours of presentations at the conference and submit abstracts of the presentations they attended, together with a reflective piece on their experience of the conference. Later in the course, they presented the results of their own research in class, in a "mini-conference" modeled on the ASA. In addition to the presentation of their research papers, each student presented a critical discussion of another student's research paper (and wrote a commentary on a further student research paper). The mini-conference was open to the Trinity community; several faculty and students not involved in the course attended. The students then revised their research papers in light of the critical discussion at the mini-conference.

I attach (i) the ASA assignment, along with (ii) an overview of the research assignment, and (iii) the assignment concerning the mini-conference.

I would say that all of these assignments were a great success. The students were clearly looking forward to the ASA throughout the semester, particularly to meet in person some of the philosophers they had read about in this course and others. Fortunately, the conference did not disappoint; in their reflections on the conference experience they all expressed gratitude for the opportunity to attend the conference, though their attitudes differed: Some were intimidated by seeing so many good philosophers present exciting new work; others were comforted that even professional philosophers give poor presentations and bad arguments!

When it came to the mini-conference, a faculty member commented to me that it was clear from their presentations that they had attended a professional conference. Most satisfyingly for me, several students said that they had changed their mind about how best to present their material on the basis of their experiences – good and bad – at the ASA. Finally, in my judgment, three out of

four students significantly improved their research papers in the revisions they made following the mini-conference, in ways that would have been unlikely without the mini-conference.

In summary, these assignments were a great success. However, two things stand in the way of repeating the experience. First, major philosophy conferences do not often come to San Antonio, making the ASA assignment, and the modeling of the mini-conference on students' experiences at a professional conference difficult to replicate. Second, there were only four students in the course by the time the mini-conference came around. Even so, the event lasted two-and-a-half hours. With more students it would be a challenge to mount the mini-conference with such success (e.g. there is probably a limited audience for such an event). Nonetheless, I will consider incorporating aspects of these assignments into future courses, particular senior seminars.