Peer and Self Assessment in the study of Philosophy and Values in Education.

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Context

*Philosophy and Values in Education* is a final year undergraduate course in the Bachelor of Education. The course uses philosophical inquiry as its core teaching method and draws upon the ideas of professional philosophy for its content. Students evaluate the possible contributions of teachers and schools to achieving greater ethical and moral coherence in both the personal and social aspects of human life. Peer and Self assessment is used as an integral component of the teaching and learning strategy employed in this course.

In common with many other contemporary educational institutions, such as schools, Griffith University espouses the valuing of “individual rights, ethical standards and social justice; personal growth and development … and life fulfilment” (Griffith University Mission Statement). However, it seems that there are many obstacles to expressing these values in action, and so students and teachers are presented with an enduring problem in making their personal and institutional practices ethically or morally sound and coherent. This course aims to prepare students to better respond to this challenge by promoting the value of ethical inquiry and educating students in its practice.

One of the specific learning outcomes which the course aims to achieve is that students who successfully complete the course should be able to use the community of inquiry method in conducting philosophical inquiry. It is within the context of this method of inquiry that peer and self assessment is integrated.

Assessment

There are three components to the assessment of students’ learning in *Philosophy and Values in Education*. These are: Participation in Group Discussion Forums (incorporating Peer and Self Assessment) and two examinations.

**Participation in Group Discussion Forums (30%)**

Each week, students are required to participate in on-line group discussion forums, and to
use an online tool (called SAGE) which supports student and group evaluation of their participation. While the forums are designed to allow students to practise and demonstrate their ability to actively contribute to a community of inquiry, the use of SAGE supports engagement in the forums by requiring students to self-assess their own participation and to peer-assess the participation of fellow group members. In *Philosophy and Values in Education* participation in the discussion forums and the use of SAGE is compulsory. The SAGE activity is designed to encourage a greater awareness in students of the criteria used to assess forum participation and so improve their participation. By engaging with weekly set problems in collaboration with their peers, students’ achievement of course learning outcomes develop over the course of the semester.

**Mid semester Exam** in week 5 (30%) and **End of course Exam** in week 9 (40%).

Each (3 hours long) exam requires students to respond, in writing, to a modified version of an ethical narrative that is discussed in the forum that week (i.e., Group Forum Topic 5 for Exam 1 and Group Forum Topic 9 for Exam 2). They are designed to allow students to demonstrate their developing understanding of four ethical perspectives which are discussed in the course, and how well they can: Identify the ethical characteristics of situations that occur in schooling (Course Learning Outcome 1); and Analyse and evaluate alternative courses of action (Course Learning Outcome 2).

**Teaching and learning strategy**

The course uses two main techniques or strategies to enhance student learning.

1. **A problem-focused** approach is taken to teaching and learning. There is much evidence that more effective student learning takes place when students engage with problems. Therefore, students are presented with problems that are interesting and important and that appeal to the intellect, imagination and emotions.

2. Students inquire into these problems **collaboratively** in order to provide them with opportunities to develop and negotiate understanding by working through ideas with others.

1 and 2 are combined in a community of inquiry wherein the collaborative engagement with shared problems allows students to check ideas, and to change ideas, in light of being presented with better arguments or further evidence. There are three types of engagement that characterise this process:

- Engaging with each other (e.g. listening, openness, sharing time, etc.);
- Engaging with ideas (e.g. asking for reasons, uncovering assumptions, etc.); and,
- Engaging in critique (e.g. self-criticism, fair criticism, checking for soundness of arguments, etc.).

These three types of engagement are elaborated on as evaluation criteria in the peer and self assessment process described later. The criteria appear in full in a “Criteria and Standards Marking Guide for On-Line Forum Participation” (Appendix 1).

The community of inquiry is constituted principally through the activities of groups of students meeting together in online **group discussion forums** together with **peer and self assessment** mediated through the separate on-line tool, SAGE. Each of these is
explained in full below. Students are also provided with a range of web-based resources and a course textbook which are designed to support the problem-focused activities.

**Group Discussion Forums**

Online group discussion forums are the main organisational activities for student learning.

By the beginning of the semester each student is allocated to an online group created by the course convenor. Problems are presented to these forum groups on a weekly basis, over nine weeks, and students are required to work collaboratively in exploring these problems.

Each discussion forum group acts as an independent learning group. It is expected that for students to obtain at least a satisfactory level of achievement in online participation they will spend most of their study time in this course engaged in researching, preparing, posting, and reading forum comments (about 10 hours per week). The posts made by students are read as a reflection of the level of activity undertaken, so, for instance, hasty, on-the-fly, and poorly prepared posts do not involve much time.

This is a compulsory activity and the participation of students is assessed according to the criteria and standards articulated in Appendix 1. The group discussion forum provides students with the opportunity to:

- work co-operatively and intensively on a shared problem by contributing their developing knowledge and understanding to the forum;
- develop their ethical thinking, in seeking to resolve ethical problems through personal reading, reflection and informed discussions in the forum, about key concepts in ethics and the ethical perspectives identified in the course; and.
- develop their ability to assess arguments about ethical matters.

Each student is required to participate in the group discussion forums by making posts to the forum each week. These posts must engage with the problem and with the posts of other members of the forum group. Over the course of each week students aim to make relevant and substantial posts to their group discussion forum that exemplify the following attributes:

1. **Analysis** i.e., explication/clarification of important issues and concepts; pertinent questions; application of relevant resources.

2. **Claims** i.e., justified statements that are relevant to the problem at hand; purported solutions(supported by reasons).

3. **Critical response** i.e., objections to others' points; building upon the points of others; critical response to another's claims.

4. **Self-corrections or elaborations** i.e., demonstrating that the critical comments of others has been taken into account.

Students are expected to think carefully about what they want to say, prepare the post in a word processing document, paying careful attention to good grammar and clarity of expression, and then copying the text to their group's discussion forum.
Prior experience with this method of teaching suggests that healthy group inquiries produce at least 70-80 posts a week per group, and vary in number from week to week. Because of this, it is a course requirement for students to make posts to designated group discussion forums several times per week over at least 3 days per week for the duration of the course (nine weeks). Throughout the course, student peers and the teaching staff assess how well each student has contributed to that process. Assessment is based on evidence drawn from direct observations of the quality and quantity of activity in group discussion forums. A large number of trivial or irrelevant posts will always be trumped by a smaller number of pertinent and helpful posts. In other words, quality is always more important than quantity.

**Self and Peer assessment**

The self and peer assessment component of the course makes use of “SAGE”, which stands for “Student and Group Evaluation”. This is an on-line tool developed at Griffith University by its Flexible Learning Access Service department in collaboration with a small number of academics. SAGE allows academics to easily set up and manage the process of obtaining, collating, and sharing self and peer feedback among peers and instructors – regardless of numbers. It effectively automates almost all the administration which would otherwise be associated with these processes, rendering the approach very much more accessible to all, and simplifying organisation which is otherwise often fraught with difficulty. What follows describes the way the tool is used to support learning in the *Philosophy and Values in Education* course (a detailed account of the tool and its many capabilities is to be provided elsewhere).

In *Philosophy and Values in Education* the SAGE tool is set up with the same student groups as the on-line forums. Each week, as well as participation in the on-line forum discussion, students are required to evaluate their own contributions to these forums and the contributions of each of the other members of their group. To do so, each student must write comments and provide a mark (in this case between 1 and 10) in response to specified criteria (in this case there are three criteria based on the three types of engagement introduced above – see Appendix 1). The comments and marks are entered into corresponding windows in SAGE.

Thus, each student:

1. Evaluates their own contributions to the on-line forums against three criteria, writes comments for each, and provides a rating for each,

and;

2. Evaluates each and every other member of the group against the same criteria, writing comments and providing ratings for each.

In the case of *Philosophy and Values in Education*, each group consists of 10 students, so each student rates themselves and 9 other students on three criteria – generating a total of 30 comments and 30 ratings per week.

One can see that managing such a situation on paper could be very complex. SAGE however, processes each student’s submission and passes the comments from each student to its intended recipient, creating a weekly page of collated feedback automatically. As a result, each student is able to view a page on which they see their
own appraisal of their own contributions, together with the self allocated marks, followed by the appraisals made by each of their 9 fellow students, and their corresponding marks. (In the case of Philosophy and Values in Education this feedback does not include the names of the students providing it.)

In consequence, each student engages in multiple cycles of critical reflection. First, each person must reflect (every week) on their own performance. Then each must reflect on the performance of 9 others. Then, when SAGE provides the collated feedback, each student reflects on what nine others have said about them, and how this compares with their own evaluation. The nature of the criteria oblige students to relate these reflections to their participation in the discussion forums – which is itself a critically reflective task. The tools combined (on-line forums and SAGE), orchestrate literally hundreds of reflective acts for every student, every week – intimately and integrally forming part of the process of the community of inquiry.

As noted earlier, this case study does not review all the capabilities SAGE has to offer. However, it is worth noting that there are many parameters the tool allows the academic to control. Included among these, the following give a taste of the flexibility and power of the tool.

Academics can set up:

- Any number of groups of students,
- Groups of any size (though groups larger than 10 are unwieldy for participants)
- Any number of criteria (though any more than 5 becomes onerous for participants)
- The requirement for group members to make comments only, ratings only, or both.
- Whether group members’ comments and ratings are anonymous.
- The period of time students can participate.

Evidence of effectiveness and impact

At this stage there is only anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of SAGE. Tutors claim that peer evaluations of performance affect student behaviours in both online and classroom settings. For instance, the less vocal participants in classroom discussions have been encouraged to speak up by peers while students who might have otherwise continued to dominate discussions have been encouraged to increase their wait-time before jumping-in with comments. In the online setting it is noticeable that over time students written discussion postings pay closer attention to the assessment criteria identified in SAGE.

Principles of Good Practice illustrated by the practice

Learning to cooperate with others is a critical prerequisite for participation in a democratic society (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999, pp. 415-416, 2001). Philosophy and values in education has this broader aim of creating the kind of person society needs – citizens who are able to actively participate in democratic societies. This encompasses the qualities of a reflective practitioner. This development occurs through students substantiating their own ideas and critiquing the ideas of others through the use of reasoned judgement. Peer and self-assessment provides a framework for students to develop the capacity to make judgements, a characteristic of an effective learner – and a requirement of a professional and citizen. The ability of SAGE to contribute to this development is recognised by students, for instance one student commented:
“SAGE was an excellent tool to support learning and encourage students to formally assess their peers and themselves”.

Bowden and Marton (2003) have written about the importance of exposing students to variation in their experiences when learning. At it's simplest they explain that if everything in the world was brown (i.e. there was no variation in colour), then we would have no concept of ‘brown’, nor of ‘colour’. For these concepts to exist, and have meaning, we must be able to discern different colours. In other words, there must be some variation. Through the peer and self assessment in this course, students repeatedly see, and reflect upon, the different ways in which they and their peers view the problems which they are set. By doing so they learn to discern these differences and, through this, to learn concepts that are important to the discipline. Representative comments from two students are:

“It made me aware of the ethical deliberations we all apply to every day situations.”

“You learn to distinguish opinion from fact more clearly, yet you can still personalise your answers. i.e. your opinion is valid as long as you can justify it after thinking through the four ethical perspectives.”

The way peer and self assessment is undertaken in this course addresses many of the problems with common assessment practices which have been highlighted by Boud (Boud, 1998, 2008). Specifically, in this course, the use of discussion forums combined with SAGE emphasise learning rather than grading, understanding rather than measurement, they adopt a focus on long-term rather than short-term and independency rather than dependency, there is emphasis on the development of skills of discernment, the traditionally invisible part of assessment: the academics' own judgements and skills of discernment are made visible to students, students obtain practice in using these criteria and standards themselves to make judgments, and the teaching staff are actively involved in training students to be able to do these things.

How to do it yourself

Academics at Griffith University can contact the Flexible Learning Access Service for assistance in setting up SAGE. It is suggested that the first use of SAGE employ only the simplest approach, but that this still be meaningfully integral to the students’ learning activities throughout the semester.

A separate report providing an introductory description of SAGE has also been prepared. It is available from the same web-site this case study.

Teaching materials:

An example "Criteria and Standards Marking Guide for On-Line Forum Participation" appears as Appendix 1 overleaf.
Criteria and Standards: Marking Guide for Online Forum Participation

- The grade is a measure of overall participation across the semester.
- First, aspects of timeliness, attendance, and participation in SAGE are noted and a judgement made about whether this satisfies the compulsory participation requirements as stated in the Course Outline.
- A judgement of unsatisfactory on this compulsory requirement will result in a course grade lower than a Pass.
- Second, judgements are made about performance characteristics contributing to reasonableness across the forums.

### Meeting of compulsory minimum requirements for timely participation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum Weeks</th>
<th>Satisfactory overall?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of substantial posts in forum week (one-liners do not count)</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated over at least 3 days?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First post prior to Wednesday?</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in SAGE - evaluating online forums</td>
<td>Formative entries &amp; Finalised</td>
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### Performance characteristics contributing to reasonableness

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Engaging with Issues</th>
<th>Quantity of contribution throughout semester</th>
<th>Quality of Contribution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>Most of the time</td>
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| Analyses scenarios (searching for and clarifying the imbedded issues) |  |
| Identifies salient ethical aspects (determining the most ethically crucial questions and issues) |  |
| Applies ethical concepts to issues (using ethical theory to express and clarify the arguments) |  |
| Provides reasons (does not rely on mere unsupported opinion) |  |
| Contributes new ideas or content (does not just repeat what has already been said by others) |  |
| Tries to progress deliberation (makes an effort to grapple with the difficult emerging issues) |  |
| Communicates ideas clearly (meaning is clear and not impeded by sloppy grammar and spelling) |  |

| Engaging with Peers |  |
| Contributes to dialogue (welcomes, adds to, and makes connections between the points of others) |  |
| Responds to others (addressing questions and issues they raise) |  |
| Tries to maintain a community spirit (being respectful, not 'flaming' others) |  |
| Compares and contrasts (showing similarities and differences in others’ views) |  |
| Explains and adds detail (by defining or illustrating the meaning of a concept, providing examples, evidence, or instances) |  |
| Seeks clarification (asks questions, suggests explanations, adds detail) |  |
| Justifies (with supporting reasons or evidence) |  |
| Challenges arguments of peers (suggesting strengths and weaknesses) |  |
| Qualifies own ideas (by clarifying, drawing distinctions, amending viewpoint) |  |
| Provides critical analysis of arguments (with counter arguments or alternative evaluations or statements of fact) |  |
| Clarifies disputes (finding the central issues or ideas generating disagreement) |  |
| Suggests resolution (synthesising a solution or creative compromise) |  |

### Overall Grade

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
References


