

Department of Philosophy

Staff-Student Committee

7 March, 2008

Minutes

Present: Lisa Nash (chair), Eric Olson, Chris Cork, Amy Wilkerson, Danielle Kelly, Alice Larden, Robin Scaife, Miranda Fisher-Levine, Steve Makin, George Botterill, Bob Stern.

1. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved.
2. First year presentations were reported as an issue – particularly in terms of the marking scheme. Students get 5 points for an outstanding presentation, 0 for no presentation, and otherwise 2. Students felt that there were enormous differences in the quality of presentations that get 2, from very good to poor, and worried that this discouraged students from putting effort into them. They suggested using the full scale from 1 to 5. GB reported that presentations were not intended to be an assessed exercise, but merely something students get credit for doing at all. Another suggestion was to give marks for participation in seminars to help with the motivation problem and low participation levels. This was quickly dismissed however, as this could easily become a form of bullying – that those who were quieter would be forced to participate or lose marks is simply much worse than low participation. It would further result in participation for participation's sake. Staff noted that this was an issue at the last SSC and it had not yet been taken to a Department Meeting. They promised to do so this time and possibly consider a more fine grained marking criteria for presentations.
3. Second year seminar groups were reported as being too large, particularly in political philosophy. Students noted that it was difficult to get a say and to maintain a sustained and interesting discussion. Staff noted that this had been raised at a Departmental meeting, and they were unsure how to resolve this problem. A number of suggestions were discussed. Postings on Moodle before the seminar was a popular choice and seems quite successful particularly at least in third year modules (although seminar group sizes in the third year were not reported as a problem). Staff said they would discuss methodology for seminar organisation and implementation among themselves and particularly with the second-year lecturers.
4. There were a few reported complaints concerning PHI217, pertaining to organisation and implementation. Particularly in the instance where students were asked to read Popper's work too late in the semester as an addition to

Plato's Republic. Also only one question was offered for the second essay. The committee noted that the evaluation questionnaires for this module were very positive. Staff noted that a complaint like this was raised earlier the semester and the lecturer was spoken to along the complainer and the issue was apparently resolved.

5. An issue was raised with the placement of reading week, as being after 3 weeks of easter and only one week of teaching. Students felt that it would be more useful in week 12 to help aid with exam preparation and end of term essay writing. (This issue does not arise in the autumn semester, as there is no mid-term vacation and plenty of time over Christmas to write.) Staff promised to look into the possibility of moving it to week 12 for next year. In addition students would like all essay questions given out before the reading week as well as suggestions for basic preparatory reading, so as to allow plenty of time to complete them.

6. The students inquired about the purpose of pre-releasing exam questions. SM noted that these were not merely parroting exercises, as it was far easier to remember something you understand than something you don't. The committee agreed in line with current departmental policy that the various forms of assessment in the department provide a variety of methods and the best of both worlds in terms of marking and avoiding plagiarism.

7. A suggestion was made to incorporate the new year third CILASS courses (Phil. Project) into something that could be undertaken by second years. Staff said they would consider it, but were reluctant to do so, so as to avoid making students' philosophy education becoming too narrow – if there are too many courses were only a narrow topic is pursued, students will not have the broad education of many sub-fields in philosophy.

8. The committee was pleased to note that the student evaluations of the third year CILASS courses were very positive and the courses have proved relatively popular and a point of interest amongst the third years.

9. A request was made for more tutorials for elementary logic to help ease the difficulty of the work. Drop-in sessions were also suggested. Students reported that the lecturer, while extremely competent and capable, sometimes moves slightly too quickly through the material. Staff noted that in many ways staff office hours are like drop-in sessions and are there for all students, whether they are having difficulty or just wanting to chat about the material. Students agreed, but suggested that perhaps a mock exam paper would be useful. Staff promised to look into the possibility to doing this.