

Online Learning and Learning at a Distance

As social networking and the use of online learning evolve in educational contexts, the opportunities for sharing ideas and discussing texts in philosophy have been undergoing something of a transformation in the last few years.

While it remains true that you are likely to be asked to read a significant amount of material in philosophy, the ways in which the text is presented, how you analyse the arguments and ideas and how you share your thinking with others is changing.

Learning in these new ways has developed under different labels and you might come across 'online learning', 'e-learning', or 'blended learning'. Each of these approaches emphasize different aspects of learning online, but they all make use of technology to enhance your learning experience in some way.

See, for example, what the Open University says about e-learning here:

www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/inclusive-teaching/e-learning.php

The follow section explores some of the implications of these new alternatives to the established methods of teaching used in philosophy.

Philosophies of learning

In order to understand the aim of these new developments it is worth bearing in mind that there is a philosophical framework, that is, an articulated conceptual

approach to the nature of education itself, underpinning the methods your lecturers and tutors use. In many cases it is based on theories that stress the *shared* nature of knowledge.

These theories state that we come to an understanding of ideas at a deep level when we employ a full range of cognitive, emotional and social connections in a group of people working together, rather than simply by using our intellects in isolation. The underlying approach draws on the idea that genuine learning is a process of *constructing* and *sharing* meaning and knowledge. That is, a theory of gaining knowledge that is quite different from the notion that we simply ‘discover facts’ about the world by ‘pure’ observation and reflection.

The result has been the development of education that stresses the provision of opportunities to explore, discuss and interact with one another in a rich environment, so that we construct knowledge of particular fields together.

Of course, it would not be a philosophy of education if this theoretical position went unchallenged, and many have produced different theories about learning, but it is influential in educational circles, and it is worth having some insight into it in order to better understand some of your educational experiences, if that interests you.

If you wish to read in much more detail about the philosophy of education, see:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/education-philosophy/>

With this in mind, let us look at some of the possibilities for supporting different ways of addressing texts and discussing them.

Reading texts online

As we have outlined in *Doing Philosophy*, the traditional approach to reading for seminars is that you will be asked to look at a significant piece of writing, perhaps with some structured questions, in order to bring to a face-to-face seminar setting your thoughts, questions and puzzles for discussion and analysis. Very

philosophy.saundersmossleymacdonaldrosslamb.continuumbooks.com
© Clare Saunders, David Mossley, George MacDonald Ross
and Danielle Lamb (2012). *Doing Philosophy 2nd edition*
London: Continuum Books

often, in year one courses, reading is from a set textbook. Textbooks often have their own accompanying questions to help prompt your understanding and explore alternatives of meaning. The text is presented as a static, linear extended argument form in paper textbooks (like this paragraph).

However, you will almost certainly be familiar with websites and social networks that have active links to other live websites or other texts, embedded media, interactive games and quizzes, etc. With the growth of these other forms of information presentation and networking, some philosophy courses are designed with aspects of interactivity built into the materials you will be asked to use as part of your studies.

VLEs

In the United Kingdom and in the United States of America it is not uncommon to find university- or college-wide use of *virtual learning environments* (VLEs) that encourage teaching staff to add interactivity and additional valuable information to their course materials.

Sometimes VLEs are called by other names or have branded names such as Blackboard or Moodle, but they all manage learning content in a rich environment on the web in a form that attempts to model some of the aspects of real-world learning. They draw on the philosophies of learning outlined above:

<http://docs.moodle.org/22/en/Philosophy>

Used well, VLEs enhance the ways that you can engage with philosophy to increase your deeper learning of the subject. While it might be a break from your previous experiences, or your expectations of philosophy, there is much to be gained by attempting to get the best of these enhanced learning opportunities. Even if, in the end, you decide you are a book-and-pen sort of person, exploring how you can draw on your experiences in the use of online and social media resources can help you to explore your own learning styles.

Philosophy and VLEs

A further point worth noting is that there are *philosophical* ramifications in the presentation of philosophy in forms other than straight text. In fact the term ‘hypertext’ was first used in the development of a philosophy of meaning in 1963 by Ted Nelson and is not as new as it might appear. Having linked ideas *within* a text presents all kinds of possibilities for breaking down the idea of a single possible meaning and provides the reader with different pathways through a text. The greater degree of freedom to ‘move around’ within the text is a gift to a keen-eyed philosophy student seeking to explore multiple subtle arguments hidden beneath the surface.

How should you approach ‘enhanced’ philosophical texts and materials for yourself? Essentially, your analysis of the arguments employed will draw on the same set of insights and skills as we have explored for traditional textual material. It is important to recognize that your critical guard can drop when the presentation of an idea is rich or enhanced by additional images or links.

The fact that an argument is made in different ways online does not prevent you from critically examining what is being said, or attempting to unearth hidden assumptions. For example, if you are examining an online text by Descartes that your tutor has enhanced with links to other texts by Descartes and related authors, you need to ask yourself, ‘do these links enhance the *argument* being made here or are they acting as a tacit appeal to authority? And if the latter, how should I assess the status of that authority?’ As a student of philosophy it remains your task to explore the arguments presented, to test their validity and assumptions, to critically assess what implications there might be and to make judgements on the value of the claims made.

Each VLE will have its own standard format for texts and it will be important to find your way around it. It is beyond the scope of this book to explore all the different options you are likely to find, but many have opportunities to share your notes and thoughts alongside and we turn to writing online next.

Discussion, sharing and writing online

We cover different aspects of discussion in *Doing Philosophy*, and we have mentioned the use of synchronous ('live') discussion as well as asynchronous discussion boards. With the spread of the use of social networking sites and microblogging, such as Facebook and Twitter, in educational settings these approaches to online learning are on the increase and evolving.

If you are already comfortable with posting comments to online discussions and including enhanced content you will find some aspects of the use of such techniques in VLEs familiar. However, there is a significant difference between chatting to friends and participating in an academic debate that, not surprisingly, centres on the rigour of the argumentation you employ to make your points.

Just as with reading, you need to ask yourself whether including particular links, media or other content in your posts to your tutorial group or tutor really improves your *argument*. Are you making a logically coherent point or are you simply upholding an opinion by piling on cases where people agree with you?

For example, your tutor may ask you to find and discuss examples of good and bad arguments for and against abortion in the online press, examining how the arguments work. If you have strong views one way or another it would be easy to simply link to a range of articles that align with your position, adding your overall post to the VLE message board, together with judgement claims about the 'strength' of the arguments employed based on how well they fit with your views.

This would be a superficial approach, entirely appropriate to Facebook, but not of the standard your tutor would wish to see. *Do not be trapped by the form of VLEs and online learning opportunities into repeating forms of writing and analysis that you use elsewhere on the web.*

The standards of rigour, argument and clarity remain the same in philosophy, whether these are expressed on paper or on a computer screen. What might differ, however, is the way you can present the elements of your argument in the flexible environment the web provides.

philosophy.saundersmossleymacdonaldrosslamb.continuumbooks.com

© Clare Saunders, David Mossley, George MacDonald Ross
and Danielle Lamb (2012). *Doing Philosophy 2nd edition*
London: Continuum Books

Other contexts: Distance learning

The employment of VLEs and online learning is also very common in almost all forms of distance learning, such as those used by the Open University (www.open.ac.uk/) in the United Kingdom. With few or no opportunities for face-to-face contact with fellow students and tutors, distance learning relies heavily on the interactive possibilities of online learning through the web.

It can be difficult to get the level of clear argument right when starting out in presenting your philosophical thoughts only in this medium. If you do face a block in doing this, there is no harm in reverting to pen and paper to get your thoughts straight before jumping in.

Making your ideas clear to yourself is the first step in making sure you have them clear for others. What VLEs tend to discourage is the opportunity to sit and reflect on what you have written before it becomes a public post, so do consider writing out what you what to say for yourself before typing it into the 'comment' box in a discussion room. Doing so does not mean you are slow or not grasping the arguments; quite the opposite, if you are making your arguments clearer with a degree of reflection and critical awareness.