

“The Trial and Execution of Socrates”: An Interdisciplinary Course Incorporating Blended and Project-Based Learning

Principal Applicant: Dr. Kathrin Koslicki (Professor & Tier 1 Canada Research Chair, Philosophy). **Co-Applicants:** Dr. Jana Grekul (Associate Professor, Sociology; Director, Arts Pedagogy Research and Innovation Laboratory (APRIL)); Ms. Laura Servage (PhD Candidate, Educational Policy Studies; Research Coordinator, APRIL).

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, Blended Learning, Project-Based Learning, Collaboration.

Abstract: This project develops an undergraduate course in Philosophy which focuses on the trial and execution of Socrates in 399 B.C. The proposed course is innovative through its unique combination of *interdisciplinary*, *blended* and *project-based* approaches to teaching and learning: (i) it brings together an interdisciplinary group of experts who will contribute a series of pre-recorded guest-lectures; (ii) it utilizes a blended or “flipped” format in which recorded content is made available to students outside of the classroom, thereby freeing up classroom time for cognitively sophisticated non-lecture-based learning activities; (iii) it applies the insights of project-based learning by asking students to develop and present a comparative case-study in which they bring to bear the course’s historical content on pressing challenges facing citizens of democratic societies today. Overall, this project aims to create an exceptional learning environment for University of Alberta students by yielding sustainable pedagogical innovation through increased collaboration among many sectors of the academy.

“The Trial and Execution of Socrates”: An Interdisciplinary Course Incorporating Blended and Project-Based Learning

This project develops an undergraduate course in Philosophy which uniquely combines an *interdisciplinary* approach to teaching with *blended* and *project-based* learning. The activities associated with this project extend well beyond those involved in normal course development in the following respects. First, the proposed course brings together a group of experts from an unusually wide range of disciplines who will contribute a series of pre-recorded guest-lectures. Secondly, we are utilizing a blended or “flipped” format in which recorded content is made available to students outside of the classroom, thereby freeing up classroom time for cognitively sophisticated non-lecture-based learning activities. Thirdly, the project-based component of the course further encourages active engagement by presenting students with the opportunity to develop, and eventually present, a comparative case-study in which they bring to bear the course’s historical content on pressing modern-day issues. Overall, in accordance with the University of Alberta’s mission statements, Dare to Discover and Dare To Deliver, this project aims to create an exceptional learning environment for our students by yielding sustainable pedagogical innovation through increased collaboration among many sectors of the academy.

The course we are proposing to develop focuses on one of the most significant events in the history of Western civilization: the trial and execution of Socrates in 399 B.C. This topic invites an *interdisciplinary* approach, since an informed answer to the question of whether the Athenians were justified in their condemnation of Socrates requires not only an examination of the philosophical positions Socrates is alleged to have held, but also an appreciation of the historical, political and cultural milieu which was current at the time of Socrates’ death. To this end, we have assembled an impressive team of collaborators from the University of Alberta’s Departments of Philosophy, History & Classics, and Political Science as well as from Concordia’s Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies, who have agreed to contribute a series of guest-lectures on a topic within their own area of expertise (e.g., the historical background; Athenian democracy and law; Greek comedy; attitudes towards morality, politics and religion; Greek homosexuality; as well as the later Hellenistic and Roman reception). As a result of these interdisciplinary contributions, students enrolled in the class will be able to develop a remarkably well-rounded perspective on Socrates’ trial and execution.

The proposed course naturally lends itself to a *blended* or “*flipped*” format. Given the logistical and administrative hurdles involved in lining up a large number of visiting speakers from several departments and universities, guest-lectures will be recorded by a professional videographer and edited into relatively short segments (approximately ten minutes in length). Students are given access to these “mini-lectures” through eClass and, in preparation for class meetings, are asked to perform a series of tasks that are designed to facilitate active engagement with the recorded content (e.g., online quizzes, surveys or group projects).

In a time of declining interest and enrollments in humanities courses (Lewin, 2013), it is especially crucial to convey to our students that their engagement with a momentous historical event --even one that took place in ancient Athens over two thousand years ago-- can nevertheless have an immeasurable impact on how they interpret and react to urgent challenges that face citizens of democratic societies today. The enigmatic and controversial figure of Socrates provides the perfect foil through which students can evaluate how individuals, who are perceived as subversive and potentially threatening (e.g., for moral, religious, political or cultural

reasons), have been, and ought to be, treated by their respective communities, especially when these communities pride themselves on their alleged adherence to democratic principles. In order to help students appreciate the contemporary relevance of Socrates' trial and execution, the proposed course incorporates the insights of *project-based* approaches to learning. Students are asked to compare Socrates' treatment at the hands of the Athenians to an interestingly similar contemporary case which particularly resonates with them, given their own background and experience (e.g., the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King or the deportation of Maher Arar). As the culmination of their work for the course, students will present their comparative case-study to the rest of the class in a suitable format (e.g., audio, visual or literary).

The schedule of planned activities is as follows. During the Spring of 2015, guest speakers will be brought together at a local venue for a one-day workshop at which they present their contributions and provide feedback for other participants. Since this event includes a research-component as well, we will seek support from the Kule Institute for Advanced Study (KIAS) in the form of a Dialogue Grant. Following the workshop, contributors will be asked to fine-tune their "mini-lectures", during the Spring and Summer of 2015. Recording sessions will be scheduled during the Fall of 2015. During the Winter of 2016, the recorded content will be edited and archived in a password-protected online format, in consultation with experienced staff from the Arts Pedagogy Research and Innovation Laboratory (APRIL). During the Winter, Spring and Summer of 2016, we will create specific learning activities designed to integrate the recorded "mini-lectures" into the course content. Assistance will be sought in this connection from the University of Alberta's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), whose blended learning experts will have useful advice on how to ensure that our proposed learning activities are properly aligned with learning outcomes and methods of assessments. In addition, we will approach subject librarians from the University of Alberta's Rutherford Library to help us locate other content which can supplement the material that is created by us specifically for this course. Prior to the Fall of 2016, we will request that this course be added to the University of Alberta course catalogue as a new course with its own course number. The course description will advertize the special features of this course to University of Alberta students: its interdisciplinary orientation, combined with its blended and project-based approaches to learning. The new course will be ready to be offered to University of Alberta students for the first time during the Fall of 2016. After the first run of the course, the outcomes of this project will be examined and publicized, using the proposed methods of evaluation and dissemination discussed below.

Educational Theory and Practice. Scholarly research has shown that two of the key pedagogical strategies used in this course, blended learning and project-based learning, are highly effective in boosting student engagement and "deep learning" (Entwistle, Christenson Hughes & Mighty, 2010). Despite their demonstrated success, the overall use of these strategies remains relatively rare in post-secondary education (Weimer, 2010). When *blended learning* is well-designed, it can increase student engagement by opening up classroom-time that is normally allocated to lectures --a didactic, one way form of communication-- to active forms of learning (Prince, 2004). The idea that students prepare for class in advance is hardly new; students have always been asked to read and complete assignments outside of class on their own time. However, the widespread availability of technology makes it possible to enhance students' self-learning through online tools such as the following: pre-recorded lectures, webquests, podcasts, video tutorials (e.g., Kahn Academy) and self-paced quizzes which provide immediate feedback. Tools such as these have been shown to be highly effecting in encouraging active learning (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). One of the main advantages of this methodology is that it allows

students to determine the pace of their own learning, since students can repeatedly view or listen to material. This feature can be especially beneficial for international students or students with disabilities, who may find it difficult to listen to lectures and take notes effectively.

When a blended course has been developed to free up more classroom-time for active learning, educators can then also more readily take advantage of other student-centered strategies such as *project-based learning* (PBL). Research indicates that PBL generates many positive outcomes, since it motivates students to take ownership of their own progress (English & Kitsantas, 2013). PBL taps into higher-order learning and creativity by encouraging students to seek out and synthesize knowledge --often across disciplinary boundaries-- to produce learning artifacts (HelleTynjälä, Olkinuora, 2006; Lee, Blackwell, Drake & Moran, 2013). The inductive nature of PBL, highlighted in Prince (2004), makes it well-suited to settings in which creativity and innovation are particularly desirable. As a result, students acquire many of the skills which employers seek in arts-degree graduates, including communication skills, independent thinking, problem-solving, team-working, and creativity (Brown & Hargis, 2008). Because projects are, as much as possible, authentic, addressing “real world” needs and problems, outcomes are of direct value to students when they need to demonstrate their qualifications to future employers.

Collaboration. This project creates multiple avenues for collaboration. First, it will strengthen connections among different faculties, departments and divisions through the involvement of a diverse group of applicants (from Philosophy, Sociology, Educational Policy Studies); teaching and non-teaching staff members from several divisions on campus (including academic departments, APRIL, KIAS, Rutherford Library and CTL); and an unusually interdisciplinary pool of contributors (from Philosophy, History & Classics, Political Science and Religious Studies). Secondly, this project opens up opportunities for collaboration among faculty members and students: two of its applicants (Drs. Koslicki and Grekul) are faculty members; the third applicant (Ms. Servage) is a doctoral student; as a confirmed “in kind” contribution, the Philosophy Department will contribute a graduate student research assistant (GRA) who will assist us with this project. Thirdly, this project encourages collaboration among different institutions (the University of Alberta and Concordia). Fourthly, this project creates opportunities for students to participate in learning-centered environments in a variety of different roles. The GRA will be integrated into many of the activities listed above and, in the process, will receive valuable training in a variety of important professional skills (e.g., organizing workshops; creating, editing and archiving recorded content; designing learning activities; aligning learning activities with learning outcomes and methods of assessments; locating supplementary course content; piloting a new course; evaluating and disseminating outcomes; and conducting pedagogical research). Once the new course is created and offered to University of Alberta students, those enrolled in it will have the opportunity to experience a novel and creative active learning environment.

Innovation. This course is innovative and expands the realm of effective practice in teaching and learning at the University of Alberta primarily due to its interdisciplinary, blended and project-based approaches to teaching and learning. No faculty member within the Philosophy Department is currently involved in a curricular project of this sort. The course’s central focus is uniquely suited to bring together experts from different sub-disciplines within philosophy (e.g., history of philosophy, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of law, philosophy of religion, epistemology), from different parts of the humanities (e.g., philosophy, history, classics, political science and religious studies), and even potentially from different faculties within the university (e.g., Arts and Law). The benefits of assembling researchers from

such an uncommonly wide array of backgrounds cannot be overstated: in the face of pressures to hyper-specialize, we are rarely presented with the chance to interact and communicate successfully across disciplinary boundaries.

Sustainability. This project has great potential to lead to sustained improvements in educational outcomes. It draws on already existing resources and expertise and does not require any additional investment in new equipment or infrastructure. Once the blended learning content for this course has been created, it can be utilized again, with minor updates and revisions, in future semesters. Given the course's interdisciplinary orientation and its novel features, we anticipate that it will be of interest to a sizable population of undergraduate students. To facilitate the course's reach even further, we will approach other departments and programs to gauge their interest in cross-listing the course (e.g., History & Classics, Political Science and Religious Studies). We also anticipate that this initiative will lay the groundwork for further worthwhile interdisciplinary ventures down the road. For example, this course could act as a stepping stone for the creation of a new interdisciplinary minor or stream within already existing degree programs. In addition, by sharing the outcomes of this project with other interested parties, our proposed course can serve as a model for others who wish to develop their own innovative, collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. While the group of experts we have assembled is specifically tailored to an in-depth investigation of the trial and execution of Socrates, other teams of researchers may want to design similar courses around different motifs which fit their own areas of expertise (e.g., the first printing of the Gutenberg Bible; the Scopes Trial; and so on). Overall, such pedagogical partnerships can lead to an increased openness which benefits students, faculty members and the university as a whole.

Evaluation. With TLEF assistance, this course will be used as a pilot project for an APRIL-sponsored SSHRC proposal, to be submitted by Dr. Grekul and Ms. Servage in 2017. Findings from it will be incorporated into a study aimed at implementing and evaluating the use of PBL pedagogy in Arts courses. Students will be surveyed about their study habits and beliefs before and after the course using the ASSIST inventory (Entwistle, 2010). Students will also be invited to participate in short (fifteen to twenty minute) interviews after the course. These interviews will be used to determine how students used the online lectures, how the project-based pedagogy influenced their attitudes about learning, and whether they perceived PBL to be a valuable and effective approach to learning. The evaluation protocol will also include classroom observation (Taber, 2013), instructors' reflective memos, and an in-depth interview with the course instructor at the end of the course. (Ethics approval concerning students as "research subjects" will be sought prior to commencement of the project.)

Dissemination. During the third and final year of the project (Spring 2017-Winter 2018), we will focus on disseminating the results of our project. At the University of Alberta, we will share our pedagogical approach with interested parties through a workshop for the Philosophy Department; participation in CTL-sponsored events; APRIL's website; and a round-table session for the Faculty of Arts. To gain broader exposure, we will present our findings at the annual conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) or a similar venue. Finally, we will write up our most important conclusions and submit the resulting manuscript for publication in an appropriate academic journal (e.g. *Teaching in Higher Education*).

References

- Bishop, J. & Verleger, M. (2013, June). The flipped classroom: A survey of the research. *Proceedings of the 120th American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference and Exposition*, Atlanta GA. Retrieved from <http://www.asee.org/public/conferences/20/papers/6219/download>
- Brown, P. S., & Hargis, J. (2008). Undergraduate research in Art History using project based learning. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 22(2), 152-158.
- English, M. C., & Kitsantas, A. (2013). Supporting student self-regulated learning in problem- and project-based learning. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, 7(2), 128-150.
- Entwistle, N, Christensen Hughes, J., & Mighty, J. (2010). Taking stock: An overview of key research findings. In Christenson Hughes, J. & Mighty, J. (Eds.), *Taking stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education* (pp. 15-51). Kingston, ON: Queens University Press.
- Helle, L., Tynjälä, P., & Olkinuora, E. (2006). Project-based learning in post-secondary education-theory, practice and rubber sling shots. *Higher Education*, 51(2), 287-314. doi:10.1007/s10734-004-6386-5
- Kiener, M. (2009). Applying the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Pursuing a deeper understanding of how students learn. *InSight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, 4, 21-27.
- Lee, J., Blackwell, S., Drake, J., & Moran, K. (2013). Taking a leap of faith: Redefining teaching and learning in higher education through project- based learning. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, 8(2), 3-13.
- Lewin, T. (2013). As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry. *New York Times*. October 30, 2013.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-231.
- Roehl, A., Linga Reddy, S., & Jet Shannon, G. (2013). The flipped classroom: An opportunity to engage millennial students through active learning strategies. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 105(2), 44-49.
- Taber, K. (2013). *Classroom-based research and evidence-based practice*. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Inc.
- Weimer, M. (2010). Taking stock of what faculty know about student learning. In J. Christen Hughes & J. Mighty (Eds.), *Taking stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education* (pp. 81-94). Kingston, ON: Queens University Press.