General Education Annual Course Assessment Form

Course Number/Title: Philosophy 70B: Modern Philosophy

GE Area: C2

Results reported for AY 2015-2016

# of sections: 2

# of instructors: 2

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Department Chair: Janet Stemwedel

College: H & A

Instructions: Each year, the department will prepare a brief (two page maximum) report that documents the assessment of the course during the year. This report will be electronically submitted, by the department chair, to the Office of Undergraduate Studies, with an electronic copy to the home college by September 1 of the following academic year.

Part 1

To be completed by the course coordinator:

(1) What SLO(s) were assessed for the course during the AY?

SLO 2: Letters courses will enable students to respond to significant works by writing both research-based critical analyses and personal responses.

(2) What were the results of the assessment of this course? What were the lessons learned from the assessment?

In my 70B courses last academic year I assigned students take-home essay topics that required them to apply a philosopher’s view to a particular case, as well as, to critically assess that view in the light of their application. One such assignment was devoted to John Locke’s use of a just war theory to justify slavery. In my fall course, students were asked to discuss critically the extent to which Locke’s account applies to the European enslavement of Africans. In my spring course, I asked students to discuss critically the extent to which Locke’s labor theory of property applies to the European appropriation of Indian land. The results in both cases ranged from a strong defense, to a strong rejection, of enslavement and dispossession, mostly with very little attention to important nuances in Locke’s account that were discussed in class. Only a handful of students (5-6 out of 25-30) engaged Locke’s views critically, by raising issues on both sides, as was done in class discussion. A majority of students (65%) presented their own view without considering Locke’s – whether they were pro- or anti- enslavement of Africans and dispossession of Indian land.

The above assessment includes an adjustment in the following spring that aimed to get better results. I shifted from the emphasis on having students critically assess the author’s view in the fall semester, to a greater focus on textual interpretation in the spring semester to improve their discussion of the philosopher’s view. This resulted in massive (over 75%) copying from online sources. Although my lectures and presentations aim to make clear the main ideas of the philosophers we are reading and students demonstrating learning by applying these ideas to particular cases, I learned from the above assessment that something in between textual interpretation and critical assessment needs to be developed that will encourage students to actually read, and think about, the philosopher’s words, rather than rely primarily on secondary sources and personal views that ignore the text entirely. When directly queried, students often complain about the difficulty they have understanding the texts. I purposely counted heads on each presentation I gave that was devoted to certain aspects of the texts that render them difficult – and about which
secondary sources are silent, misleading, and even wrong. I ascertained that missing class at key moments contributed greatly to students relying on secondary sources, rather than on material covered in the courses. In some cases this includes copying directly a lot of irrelevant secondary material.

(3) What modifications to the course, or its assessment activities or schedule, are planned for the upcoming year? (If no modifications are planned, the course coordinator should indicate this)

See the answer above concerning the ongoing process of modification of teaching strategies for this SLO.

Part 2

To be completed by the department chair (with input from course coordinator as appropriate):

(4) Are all sections of the course still aligned with the area Goals, Student Learning Objectives (SLOs), Content, Support, and Assessment? If they are not, what actions are planned?

Yes - Janet Stemwedel, Department Chair

(5) If this course is in a GE Area with a stated enrollment limit (Areas A1, A2, A3, C2, D1, R, S, V, & Z), please indicate how oral presentations will be evaluated with larger sections (Area A1), or how practice and revisions in writing will be addressed with larger sections, particularly how students are receiving thorough feedback on the writing which accounts for the minimum word count in this GE category (Areas A2, A3, C2, D1, R, S, V, & Z) and, for the writing intensive courses (A2, A3, and Z), documentation that the students are meeting the GE SLOs for writing.

Class enrollment for this course did not exceed GE guidelines this year. If it did it would be modest, no more than 12 per cent. This does not pose a problem for getting sufficient feedback. The instructor of record provides feedback and grades all writing assignments and welcomes, if not requires, first drafts of all writing assignments and provides feedback on drafts. If sections are exceptionally oversized (which would probably never happen for this course) they are graded by the instructor of record with the assistance of an Instructional Student Assistant (ISA). The ISA must be approved both by the Instructional Assistant Coordinator and the Philosophy Department Chair for their excellence in both composition and their expertise in the field of philosophy at issue. Whenever an ISA aids in the grading of a large course, s/he provides feedback along with grading. In all cases, when the help of an ISA is employed, the instructor of record must explicitly notify the students of the class that some writing assignments have been graded and feedback has been provided by an ISA. If a student is unhappy with an ISA grade the instructor of record will rereads the paper, provide additional feedback, and regrade the assignment (if that is warranted.) Generally speaking, any instructor who is teaching more than 100 GE students in a semester receives ISA help.