

# Personal Reflections and Philosophical Performance

Jenny Keefe, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Parkside  
Teaching Scholar. OPID Wisconsin Teaching Scholars and Fellows (WTFS) Program 2016-2017

## Introduction

My project concerns my General Education class PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophy. Some students go on to become Philosophy majors and minors but, for the majority of my students, this is their only college class in philosophy. Also, this is one of the classes at my University that has a relatively high DFW rate. Hence, my motivation was twofold:

- 1) Consider methods to increase engagement with philosophy
- 2) Examine ways to enhance student performance

## Relevant SOTL scholarship

“The cognitive work of connecting the personal and the scholarly can be academically rigorous and insightful.”

Ng, L. & Carney, M. A. (2017) Scholarly personal narrative in the SoTL tent. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 5(1). <http://10.20343/teachlearningqu.5.1.10>, p.2

This project is inspired by SOTL studies in belonging and learning, especially those that are focused on Value Affirmation and Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN). Such studies led me to consider: how does writing about one’s connection to a philosophical topic affect student performance?

## Methodology

- ❖ Students are divided into 2 groups: 1) Group A, 2) Group B
  - Group A receives an intervention for Section 2: Epistemology, Group B is the Control group
  - Group B receives an intervention for Section 4: Free will & Determinism, Group A is the control group
- ❖ Intervention groups are asked to complete a written assignment that asks them to reflect on the personal and transcendent value of the following philosophical subjects:
  - Knowledge
  - Freedom
- ❖ The Control groups are asked to answer some general questions about these topics
- ❖ Analysis of the student test scores in these areas as well as the overall class alongside their participation in the exercise

## Sample

### Intervention questions

- Do you believe that you are free? Why (not)?
- Has there been a significant moment in your life when you felt like you acted freely?
- Has there been a significant moment in your life when you felt like your freedom was constrained?
- How important is freedom to you? Explain your answer.

### Control questions

- In your own words, provide a ‘dictionary definition’ of freedom
- What sorts of things/events, *etc...* (if anything) could curtail a person’s freedom? Explain your answer.

## Student voices

### Intervention answers

“I feel free every time I go to the gym to work out and/or train”

“when I had my son, who was conceived of sexual assault, many people tried to force me into aborting him but I chose to keep him .... Freedom is extremely important to me”

“No, I don’t believe that I am free. As a black female in society I do not feel free because there are restrictions placed in society due to my race and gender making it a lot harder to be successful. I cannot recall a moment when I felt I acted freely.”

“[I acted freely] the moment I decided I was going to quit slacking on my goals and actually pursue them. I stopped listening to doubt from the outside and within and gave myself to my inner passions.”

“[My freedom was constrained] when I bought my second car. My parents wouldn’t let me buy a mustang because we didn’t have enough space for it.”

### Control answers

“Freedom is the ability to make your own decisions and control your own actions, but with moral limitations.”

“Freedom is the ability to make one’s own choices and not be restrained or overly influenced by another. It is the ability to do as one wishes.”

## Results

### Quantitative analysis

- Provides no discernable results
- Grades for the intervention group and the control group are comparable
- The average grades for the 2 classes that were analyzed and prior classes are comparable
- ❖ Conclusion: neither the intervention nor the control increased/decreased student performance

### Qualitative analysis

- The answers to the control questions varied in quality but all were very factual and impersonal
- There was a range of answers for the intervention questions; some were matter-of-fact, whereas others were very personal
- ❖ Conclusion: it could be that the students’ own experiences and/or dispositions are more relevant to the answers provided than the questions asked.

### Reflection on the study

- This was set up as a quantitative analysis, yet, the qualitative material provides more interesting material.
- As a Professor, I found this a useful way to set up and introduce a class section because students were provided with a chance to transition from one section to the next by thinking generally about the forthcoming topic.
- Yet, this neither increased nor decreased overall student performance. It follows that while there is no reason to stop using this technique, other techniques should be explored for the purpose of improving performance.

## Further directions/next steps

### Next steps/Amendments

- Further qualitative analysis of the student’s specific answers and the connection to their performance
- Future analysis of whether intervention correlates with students’ engagement with philosophy (via pre and post class survey) rather than performance
- Are the ways to change the writing assignment, which would make it more effective?
- Should this be applied for all sections of the class? Would there be a difference in student performance if this was applied to all 5 class sections?

### Research

- Further study of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) – how can a social science method help a humanities subject?
- Further study of Values Affirmation literature – how to revise the project for better results

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the UW System Office of Professional Instructional Development (OPID) and UW-Parkside’s Office of Academic Affairs for funding this project. And, many thanks to Cyndi Kernahan & David Voelker, UW-Parkside’s Teaching & Learning Center, and the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars of 2016-2017 for their help and support.