Philosophy In and Out of the Classroom

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Research Problem

Introduction to Philosophy is for nearly all students who take the course (in the current study, 87%) the first encounter with philosophy. At the same time, most students who take Introduction to Philosophy are motivated to do so entirely by factors that are peripheral to the content of the course (e.g., to satisfy a requirement, time-constraints and the need for credits, etc.). Because of this, Introduction to Philosophy faces challenges likely common to all disciplines to which a student's first exposure is at the college level. Students do not have a sense of how, why, or indeed, whether, such a course does or could relate to anything else they might be doing. The result is that the majority of students are, at best, only motivated externally to succeed in the class. At the same time, there is a widely recognized relation between motivation and learning. Given these considerations, my project begins by asking:

What kinds of assignments are likely to stimulate or increase motivation?
Do any assignments, additionally, have an impact on student learning?

In my project I sought to combine features of activities that are known to increase or stimulate motivation with those that are known (independently) to improve student learning in certain ways. In the current study, I focus on one assignment that is designed with two goals in mind. First, the assignment is designed to increase student motivation in two ways: by giving control over much of the content of the work to the students themselves and, thus, by allowing students to connect the course to topics that may be of interest to them independently of the course. Second, the assignment, by requiring students to apply skills learned in the context of the classroom to a new context, is designed to encourage transfer of learning, which is thought to improve understanding.

Previous Research

In the most general sense, "to be motivated means *to be moved* to do something" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Kinds of motivation can be distinguished by their source. External or extrinsic motivation describes motivation to do something "because it leads to a separable outcome" Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such outcomes, in an educational setting, might include getting a good grade or completing a project or class. Internal or intrinsic motivation describes motivation to do something "because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Some more recent work on motivation, drawing on the work of Wigfield & Eccles (2000), understands motivation, particularly in learning contexts, to be a function of two factors – students' subjective value appraisals of a course's content and their expectations about their ability to learn the material (Ambrose et al., 2010; Svinicki, 2004). On this model, low subjective appraisals of the value – whether intrinsic or extrinsic – or low appraisals of one's ability to learn new material can negatively impact motivation, and thus, learning. Two implications of this model, made explicit in Ambrose et al. (2010) and Svinicki (2004), are central to understanding how to effect improvement in student motivation. First, increasing students' evaluation of their own efficacy, and thus their expectations about their prospects in a course, can increase their motivation. Second, improving students' subjective valuation of the material they are learning can improve their motivation. The present study focuses on the second implication and follows the literature in supposing that assignments of the kind that typically increase students' thinking about the value of their learning will have an effect on their motivation and learning. Factors that tend to increase subjective appraisals of value are many. In this study, I developed an assignment that combined two such features: control and personalization.

In addition to these findings about student motivation, a second strand of research relevant to this topic focuses on the role of 'transfer' – which can be defined as, "the application of skills learned in one context to a novel context" (Ambrose et. al. 2010). Though transfer is a widely shared goal in education, it is, as Ambrose et al. (2010) note, neither easy nor automatic. Much that is written on transfer focuses on distinctions between different types or levels of transfer (near/far, low road transfer vs. high road transfer). This is meant to distinguish cases of transfer that are similar in various ways to the original context of learning (near transfer) and thus do not require much cognition to carry out (low road transfer) from cases of transfer that are very dissimilar (far transfer) and thus require more cognitive activity (high road transfer) (Perkins & Salomon, 1987). My project draws on this research indirectly in constructing an intervention that requires students to practice transfer.

Methodology

Drawing on the research described above, this project sought to combine elements of assignments that tend to improve motivation and those that require some level of transfer. The project centers on this assignment. In the assignment students were asked to find an argument outside the course materials. Typically, students sought arguments from on-line sources (some samples are included below). Students were asked either to extract arguments from (typically) longer texts – e.g., news articles – or to supply missing components of incomplete arguments found in shorter form – e.g., in Tweets or other social media outlets. Students worked together in groups to produce a 'Standard Form' version of their argument. This required students to re-articulate the argument in Premise-Conclusion form. Students were also asked to produce a diagram of their re-articulated argument. Each group presented their argument to the class with the aims of (a) explaining the structure of the argument and (b) weighing in on the argument's merits.

Both before and after the assignment, students took a quiz designed to assess their level of understanding basic concepts of arguments. The basic concepts included (a) argument structure – e.g., the relation between premises and conclusion, (b) criteria for inclusion in an argument – e.g., well- vs ill-formed statements, and (c) criteria for evaluating arguments – e.g., logical structure (validity/strength) and the truth (soundness/cogency).

Students also answered a brief survey designed to gauge their motivation and interest during the time they were working on this project.

Samples of Student Work

Results

Presented here are some of the results from the project. The pre-test and post-test taken by students included both multiple choice questions and short response question. On the multiple choice questions, there was no improvement (or movement of any kind) on the scores. The two charts below illustrate student scores on two of the short response questions. Results are given in percentages.
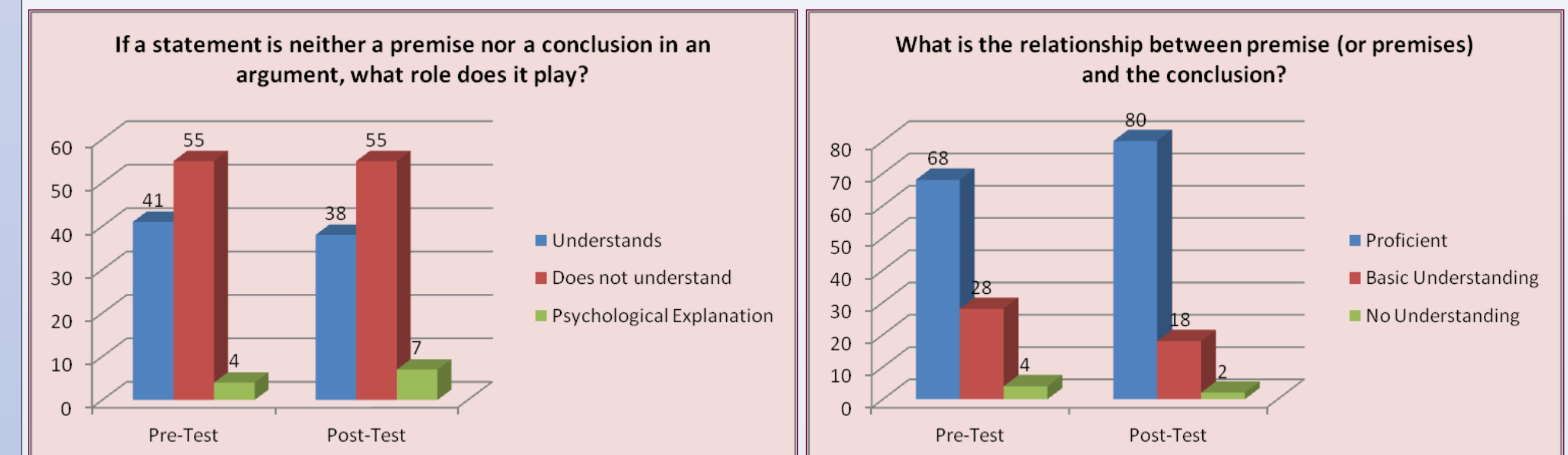
Student attitudes were measured by means of a brief survey given after the completion of the Transfer Project. Students were asked to give their evaluation of the relevance and importance of philosophy to their broader learning and life.
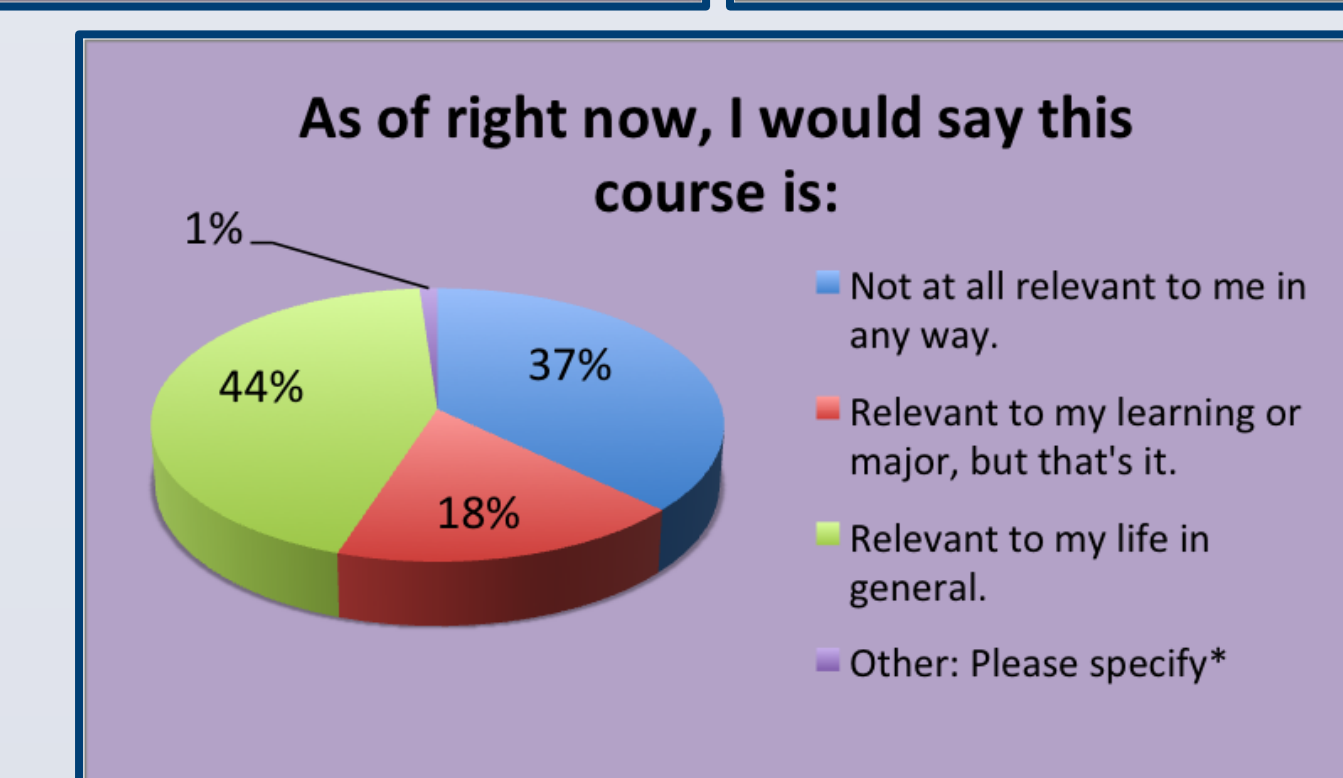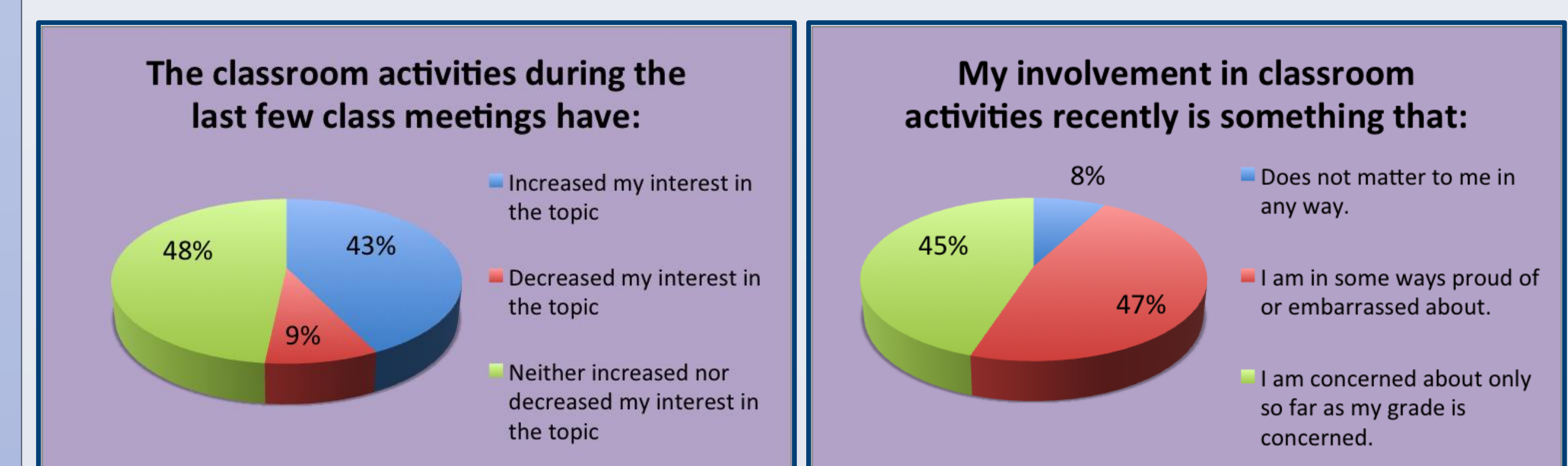
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