

Teaching Evaluation for Guest Lecture
PHL 410: Socrates and Plato
03/23/2020: Plato's *Lysis*

This is an evaluation of Taylor Mills' teaching performance for a class session she taught on March 23rd, 2020. The topic was Plato's *Lysis*, a dialogue about friendship. The class had initially been meeting in-person, but was moved online when MSU migrated all classes online due as part of its response to COVID-19. The class met virtually over zoom.

Communication

Taylor demonstrated exceptional communication skills. She began by sending the class an email in which she introduced herself and gave them two short assignments to complete before class: (1) reflecting in writing on their own thoughts about friendship prior to reading the dialogue, and (2) completing a short survey about their initial understanding of the text. She also asked students to make sure they had pencil and paper ready to hand during our class session, as she had an activity planned that would require this. Students were all ready to go at the start of class, and had completed the work she requested of them. This is good evidence that Taylor's pre-class communication was successful.

During the class session, I observed Taylor's ability to gently redirect the discussion when students were confused or off track. For example, at one point Taylor asked students to analyze a particular section of the text. When one student brought in a part of the text not relevant to the current discussion, Taylor recognized the student's insight while also pointing everyone back to the passage currently under discussion. This sort of redirection has to be handled carefully, as the instructor needs to both (a) be clear that the student is off track so that other students will not be confused, while (b) point this out in such a way that the student feels validated and continues to feel comfortable contributing to the discussion. I thought Taylor balanced those two considerations beautifully. I was especially impressed that later in the discussion, when the student's point did finally become relevant, Taylor returned to their point and acknowledged their contribution.

Taylor also did an excellent job of communicating with respect to the specific tasks she wanted students to perform during the class session. One of her principal aims was to have students map out the structure of the dialogue, and so she broke the dialogue into smaller chunks and had students work through them together one at a time. Since this was a new approach for these students, Taylor made what she had in mind clearer by starting the class off with a concrete example and working through it with us.

Teaching Techniques

Even experienced philosophy students often find Platonic dialogues particularly challenging. Because the dialogues explore philosophical ideas in the form of a conversation, many students struggle to follow the thread of the arguments, and even to identify the dialogue's principal claims, arguments, and objections. Taylor used a variety of teaching techniques to increase student understanding of this difficult text.

The dialogue mapping exercise I describe above was, I thought, very successful. The exercise was facilitated by clear and concise slides in which Taylor made it clear which part of the text students should consider and what the students should be looking for, i.e. how many arguments they should

identify, how many objections, and how many conclusions. After open discussion, in which the class looked for these items collaboratively, Taylor presented a slide in which she had everything broken down. She also encouraged students to draw out a concept map for each section, and provided the class with example and suggestions. (E.g. “This argument comes back to the earlier argument, so you might want to represent them as a kind of circle”.)

In addition to the mapping exercise, Taylor did some brief lecturing. This was mainly done for the purpose of framing the dialogue’s discussion and for transitioning from one part of the dialogue to the other. Taylor’s lecturing was very clear, and these interludes served to make sure that everyone was on the same page. I thought the balance of lecture to discussion was appropriate for a class session that had as its main goal to deepen student understanding of the dialogue’s structure.

Student Engagement

Taylor faced two special challenges with respect to student engagement: (1) as with any guest lecturer, students are sometimes a bit quieter than they would be with their regular instructor, and (2) the course was taking place on zoom, and it is more difficult to maintain engagement when communicating through a screen. She handled both challenges very successfully, due to a combination of creativity and flexibility. Taylor has also initially planned—when MSU classes were still meeting in person—to have students partner up to discuss their own initial reflections on friendship. When the course moved online, Taylor made use of a feature on zoom (breakout rooms) that allowed her to temporarily assign two students each to separate zoom sessions. This allowed students to engage with a partner on the basic theme of the dialogue. While one or two students experienced some technical difficulties, Taylor remained flexible and did not let this distract or derail the session.

I observed Taylor using several techniques to elicit student engagement. First, having students write out their own thoughts on friendship and then share them with a partner made the dialogue’s theme relevant and personal for each student. Second, Taylor was open and receptive to student comments and questions, and always worked to integrate these into the discussion. Finally, Taylor was willing to let there be some silence while students worked through their thoughts before contributing to the discussion. I think this allowed students to give more thoughtful and engaged responses to her questions and prompts.

Overall Assessment

It was a genuine pleasure to see Taylor in action in the classroom. She prepared a highly structured and clearly organized class session, which she readily adapted when MSU moved classes online. Her initial teaching plan, when she had been expecting the class to meet in-person, was highly innovative and interactive. With some clever and creative thinking, she managed to implement many of her initial ideas even in an online setting. This ability to balance structure and planning with flexibility and creativity is a real strength of hers, and very valuable for any teacher.