Grading (Anxious and Silent) Participation: Assessing student attendance and engagement with Short Papers on a "Question For Consideration"

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Abstract (147 words):

The inclusion of attendance and participation in course grade calculations is ubiquitous in postsecondary syllabi, but can penalize the silent or anxious student unfairly. I outline the obstacles posed by social anxiety, then describe an assignment developed with the twin goals of assisting students with obstacles to participating in spoken class discussions, and rewarding methods of participation other than oral interaction. When homework assignments habituating practices of writing well-justified questions regarding well-documented passages in reading assignments are the explicit project of weekly class meetings, participation increases on the part of all students. My focus shifted away from concern that I must get students to talk more, and turned instead to ensuring their marks reflected their learning rather than their speaking. Students' improved engagement as a result of the assignment bears out evidence in the literature for active learning and for alternatives to taking attendance and quantifying participation.

Keywords: social anxiety, participation, attendance, grading oral participation

How to grade students' participation and count attendance as part of a course grade, if at all[1], is an enduring challenge for new instructors. As a graduate student, I was disorganized when it came to tracking students' attendance. Moreover, I brought to my assessment woes the particular concern that students with social anxiety and/or selective mutism sometimes cannot talk in class for reasons beyond their control, and occasionally avoid class meetings entirely.[2] Yet my first teaching opportunities in graduate school were in leading "discussion sections," the very name of which seemed to reinforce the importance of quantities of talking. More than one confident student seemed to hold the view that if one showed up and talked a great deal, then one deserved a better grade than did the silent classmate in the front row whose heartrate increased and whose throat closed every time they stepped through a classroom door. Initially, then, the assignment I describe in this essay was designed primarily to better

reflect what some of the quietest students were doing in the course; partly because they were aware that they didn't talk "enough," some of my most painfully shy students worked hard to compensate with perfect attendance, diligent reading of the texts, and excellent, reflective homework responses to reading assignments. They were participating in some meaningful ways, interacting with the texts and demonstrating their appreciation of discussions and lectures in the classroom in subsequent written works. I wanted to devise an assignment which might increase their quantities of verbal address, and even more, I wanted an assignment that rewarded the many kinds of interaction that they already demonstrated.[3]

The resulting assignment discussed here is now one I share regularly, and colleagues have reported finding it useful for reasons exceeding assessment of participation. In Part One below, I contextualize my reasons for developing assignments to measure the participation of students with varieties of obstacles to attendance and discussion. In Part Two, I provide the assignment in its current form (and Appendices for the online version and for rubrics used in assessing each response and for calculating weights in the course grade). I discuss the assignment in some detail, and identify the elements of the assignment that reflect available research in effective discussion and increasing student learning.

My reasons for creating the assignment started simply with concern for anxious and silent students; I am happy to find that this writing assignment has increased all my students' oral participation rates, and more fundamentally, engaged them in the sort of active learning that David Concepción emphasizes in describing students who are "*doing* philosophy, not merely *reading about* philosophy."[4] My initial frustration as a teaching assistant, that quantity of verbal address was not reflective of (able-bodied or disabled) students' achievements and participatory activities, gained new clarity of purpose when I became a professor and read Concepción's arguments for teaching students how to read philosophy: "If we show students how to read philosophy well we will increase learning and

when learning is increased, student enjoyment and retention tend to rise as well."[5] Once my focus shifted *away* from concern that I must get silent students to talk more, and turned instead to ensuring their marks reflected their learning rather than their speaking, I found that my students all participated more, in several ways. Their rise in enjoyment yielded a rise in oral participation among other forms. Quantities of speaking measurably increased only after I stopped aiming for quantity.

Part One: Challenges in assessing attendance and participation

Of course, certainly one could dispense with the challenges inherent in quantifying attendance and participation by choosing not to include them in one's course grade calculations at all. Philosophers and colleagues in other fields have eloquently argued against the worth of counting attendance and against the quest to require participation. Daryl Close argues that policies penalizing imperfect attendance are unfair, because "mere physical presence in the classroom does not constitute 'student work.'"[6] Importantly for my purposes, Close argues instead for grading in-class activities, for which the absent could receive a zero. "This approach is quite different than grading on attendance, *per se*… In place of mere attendance, we must instead develop an appropriate rubric for evaluating the in-class activity."[7]

Antonina Balas relatedly rejects "participation as a means of assessing students' knowledge," because cultural differences affect rates of verbal address; she suggests that American students may be encouraged to, and seem more likely to, make comments and ask questions during lectures, but that international students may come from cultures in which "it would be considered impolite – or even insulting – to interrupt a lecturing professor."[8] Since "their silence does not, to any extent, mean a lack of knowledge" in "a culturally diverse classroom," Balas concludes that participation as a grading criterion "is not objective, and it appears to be unfair."[9] Stephen Esquith observes more bluntly that "to

force them to talk about what they have read by grading participation and taking attendance" is a form of coercing our students, if "students really do not have much of a choice."[10] Esquith adds,

> For students, not having much of a choice means choosing between a) participating…, and b) remaining silent, participating in only a token manner, or dropping the course. Dropping the course is only a problem, if the course is required for graduation or admission to a postgraduate program. Token participation and silence are problems, if adverse consequences are attached to them, either in the form of lower grades or other negative outcomes.[11]

As I discuss in more detail below, these are especially adverse consequences for students with social anxiety, who regularly face choices to either drop a needed course or be penalized for their silence.

Students may be silent in one's classroom for many reasons. The range of circumstances facing the reticent, the anxious, the unprepared, the bored, the distracted, or the sleepy are too many to consider; in this essay I focus on the socially anxious student in particular, as they can go whole semesters without oral contribution in class, and as their responses of avoidance and silence are not within their control, making it especially unfair when they are penalized by equations of participation with quantities of talk. Social anxiety (also known as social phobia) is not merely the widely shared fear of public speaking, and is not overcome by simply being forced to face one's fear. It is usually chronic and lifelong, characterized by "a marked and persistent fear of social or performance situations [which] tend to be avoided or endured with extreme distress."[12] Students with social anxiety "habitually avoided public situations such as lectures, seminars and project groups by being absent or through non-participation."[13] Although bystanders do not always perceive anxious students' distress, the experience of students with anxiety includes severe apprehensions that others can detect their symptoms.

> Physical symptoms, including a rapid heart rate, blushing, or trembling, often accompany the anxiety, which may be a source of further humiliation. Individuals with social phobia are constantly worried about looking foolish in front of others; for example, during public speaking,

> the individual has a fear of being embarrassed that others see their hands or voice tremble. Furthermore, the anxiety experienced may develop days or weeks before the social situation, and continue for days or weeks after the situation (individuals constantly experience guilt and worry over what others thought of them and their performance/how they were judged). This has tremendous implications for health.[14]

The obstacles for silent and anxious students in particular are elaborated insightfully by Kevin Meyer, who further notes that while attendance and participation as components of course grades are widely used in higher education, their iterations vary dramatically.[15] Oral participation grades are particularly vaguely constructed, the conditions for their successful achievement are often poorly identified or modeled to students, and assessment of participation turns out to be unevenly applied. Meyer finds, in studies of Communications courses remarkably consistent with recent discussions of Philosophy, that instructors are often lacking *any* training with respect to devising measures of participation or conveying the methods for succeeding at meeting those measures to students. Meyer concludes that to the extent that many instructors assume oral participation leads to learning or exhibits qualities of cognition, they are laboring under false beliefs, and sometimes intentionally, given the number of instructors that also report using attendance and participation as a "fudge factor" in grading. Jennifer Wood states more bluntly, of the "ubiquitous" participation component in many syllabi, "class participation is an ineffective measurement of a student's abilities or a student's engagement with the course material and should not be used as such. Indeed, the only valid purpose for making participation a requirement in class is to teach students *how* to participate," a purpose that Meyer establishes is rarely pursued by instructors.[16]

I am alert to the concerns of the scholars above that counting attendance and participation toward a course grade can run the risk of being arbitrary, mysterious, culturally obtuse, coercive, and ableist. Concerns like these have, in the past, moved me to dispense with the attendance and

participation grade components for some courses. I no longer omit such a component, however. Omitting anything like attendance and participation seemed to fail to capture much of what silent students were doing well, flattening the assessment to a small portion of what a semester involves. In the semesters in which I omitted such components, the students who struggled with silence but scrupulously attended every class and wrote reflectively about discussions were not being recognized for efforts that less engaged students often dispensed with for sometimes frivolous reasons. Steering away from measuring quantities of attendance and participation is not enough, and I found that I need a replacement which did justice to students' exertions and multiple means of engaging.

With Jennifer McCrickerd, I hold that course grades should reflect not just mastery of content, but demonstrations of skills and behaviors conducive to future success in a classroom (and beyond); McCrickerd includes "(a) ability to work in teams and (b) effort and willingness to take risks," and she suggests that those looking at a student's grade may further want to know "how the student applied herself, how she responded to making mistakes, whether she opted for more difficult tasks or instead chose the easiest path through the course."[17] Annually, I am inundated with reference letter requests from students' would-be workplaces or graduate studies, asking me how my students demonstrated qualities including leadership, reliability, respect, punctuality, concern for others, maturity, and more; these requests may be answered better with thoughtful means of assessing attendance and participation rather than an utter absence of related measurements.

Part Two: The "Questions for Consideration" assignment

Before I knew much of the above, my initial motivation to develop the assignment I describe was the product of my own errors. I had at least the basic and correct understanding that all students, including social anxious students, could participate more easily if they had a prepared line or two. "Everyone bring a question to class, and handing it in will count as your attendance for the day," I told

my first students, confident that this would result in my being able to call on and engage the mum. The results were mixed, sometimes irksome. Some questions bore little relation to the assigned reading, some were related but not philosophical as much as they were historical or biographical, and some were merely whinges with a question mark at the end. Realizing my mistake, I clarified my expectations at the next opportunity, that the question must be about a point or passage from the content of the text assigned for that week's class meetings.[18] When the results improved in focus but not as greatly in philosophical substance, an early version of the assignment below was born, and deployed from the start in subsequent terms.

Weekly assignment: Question For Consideration (QFC)

Every week, students will register their attendance in class by handing in a typed and printed "Question for Consideration." This is the only way that attendance will be counted, so it is in students' interests to hand in something, even if it is only a piece of paper with one's name on it. These are only accepted in hard copy in class. These are never accepted electronically in lieu of attendance; credit is only given to students who bring these to class, since the purpose of the QFC is to generate class discussion between prepared discussants.

A "Question For Consideration" may be about any philosophical aspect of the assigned texts we have read for that day's session, but (1) it must be clearly and directly tied to a text by indicating a sentence or passage quoted from the text, and the page number on which the sentence or passage was found. (2) Not only should a selection and a page number appear, but a philosophical question about the selection or its context should be supplied. (3) Thoughtful and excellently prepared quotes supply a reason the student is asking that question, and further, (4) hazard an educated guess as to the answer. By an educated guess, I mean a guess informed by the text, so the best QFCs will include (5) a quote from another point in the text to support one's own answer to one's own question. Length usually exceeds one page but should not go over two.

> Students will be asked to volunteer to share their QFC with the class. If students do not volunteer, I proceed to start calling on students to read their question aloud. So aim for a question that you are unafraid to share with the rest of the group. We can be very helpful in working out the answers to questions about the text together, so consider the class a collection of allies in the struggle for understanding. It is my hope that by engaging in discussions of your questions, you will learn more than just the tested material. I don't know if you have ever been told this, but all professors want you to learn more than we test you on.

The elements that ended up in the QFC have been adjusted in response to experiences with repeated uses over the years, and a modification of this assignment is provided at the end of this essay for unusually large classes which required my taking a more "flipped" approach and resorting to PowerPoint (Appendix B), but the basics have remained largely the same in light of their effectiveness. The purposes of the assignment are now multifold. I came to realize that I was worried not only about the participation of some of my disabled students, but about how to consistently assess anyone's participation. My early students felt, with some justice, that participation was assessed in mysterious or subjective ways, and that the department's mandate to take attendance was unexplained or under-motivated. My own disorganization and interest in excusing understandable absences did not promote the sense that attendance was excellently recorded.

It was also evident that lower participation was connected to a lack of preparation on the part of some students, and a certainty on the part of others that if participation really *was* just a quantity of speaking, then preparation was unconnected to confidently winging it on the part of the glib. Still other students were uncertain what was expected of them; most classes were largely enrolled with non-majors, unfamiliar with philosophy and unclear as to the hidden curriculum. At the same time, I was uneasy with the extent to which I had not entirely succeeded in connecting my writing assignments

clearly to our weekly activities in class, and yet I was impatient with my students' poor documentation of the support for their claims in their papers. Kant hates animals, a student commented in a major paper, and I found myself writing the same comment over and over, on his paper and on others: "You have to show evidence from the text by directly quoting a relevant sentence by the author." I no longer have to write this on every major paper. (I return to the reasons for this later.)

My grading is now more structured for my sake and my students' sakes, assessment is much easier, much less dull, and more well-justified on dimensions both quantitative and qualitative. The degrees of complexity built into the assignment and the rubric rewarded high effort while providing good partial credit to many students. Happily, a built-in safety valve of my syllabus, assigning more short papers than were required for even the top grade (only the best ten of twelve or thirteen count toward the course grade), meant that I was able to cease tracking attendance or excuses. It was up to students when and whether to attend or hand in QFCs, and absences were at their discretion rather than mine. And the result of building the participation-and-attendance grade on an assignment in documenting the location of a passage yielded better midterm essays and final papers. Most, but not all, students convert to active learning, yet even the disengaged no longer have end-of-year arguments with me as to whether or not they attended or participated. The experience is transparent for everyone.

Before I explicate the pedagogical support for particular elements of the QFC, I wish to make one more general observation about using a highly structured writing assignment to organize discussions. When I devised the QFC, I expected that more content-focused discussion would result from better preparation, and it did. I had not expected that it would continue to flow freely, and instead held initial worries that the structure which, admittedly, made my assessments easier, might inhibit creative insights or affective conversations in class. And I was prepared to sacrifice it; I was initially concerned with simply making sure the knowledge of the text was packed into their heads like suitcases before they came to class, since the evidence suggests that understanding of readings is more efficiently stored

in long-term memory when students engaged with the text actively, taking notes and writing about what they read.[19] To my great relief, as it turned out discussions started out within narrow limits, but quickly developed into interchanges between students who volunteered, "What you wrote is related to what I wrote! I'm so glad I'm not the only one who was confused by that line." My experiences bear out the finding that "the most lively, productive interaction in classes usually results from clearly structured guidelines,"[20] and my anxious students benefited from the sense that they need not be tensely vigilant for unexpected threats when the departure point of class discussion was pre-arranged. "Unstructured classes and undirected activities can in fact seem the most hazardous to students, because from one moment to the next they do not know what is going to happen to them,"[21] and I find that the QFC as a starting point for a class session structures at least part of the class, while promoting the exploration of open-ended questions.

Part Three: Rationale for elements of the QFC assignment and course grade-weight

(1.) The title: Question for Consideration

As more than one philosopher has noted, our field has a history of encouraging an adversarial approach to a text.[22] Even for students somewhat familiar with philosophy, the understanding that texts are arguments may generate an approach that engaging with it in writing or discussion entails "advocacy of a strongly held position," and a consequent inference that one without such a strong position has less to say.[23] Such assumptions motivated my dual concern that some students were proffering the answers they thought I wanted, while other students were at a loss as to what to write or say. I addressed, in class, the tendency that students may have experienced in high school for teachers to assign homework questions to which they wanted the right *answers*, and told my students that instead, I assigned them the homework of figuring out what might be right or good *questions*. "How do we know what 'good

questions' are?" my students reasonably asked. I address our discussion of that problem in section (5) below.

(2.) Every week…this is the only way that attendance will be counted…

I have excellent company in higher education in struggling with the balance between lenience and understanding with respect to attendance, and setting high expectations for my students' sake as well as my own organizational health. The requirement to write something every time and let the physical papers count as attendance has made my life much easier. Although it sounds like I am grading all the time, the "safety valve" I build into the course does not require perfect attendance for the highest grade; only the top 70% or so of QFCs count toward the final course grade. I find that it is usually the case that not all students do the writing every week, taking the opportunity to decide when they want to exert themselves, and when they don't or cannot. In response to the rare, but inevitable, request from absent students that I accept emailed attachments in lieu of attendance, I can now turn away the emails, and point to the fact that they will have other opportunities to provide written work for assessment in person at a later day in the term. This is remarkably successful in reassuring both of us that multiple opportunities to succeed are available. Students who choose not to attend believe they are still provided chances to succeed, and I no longer have to worry that a denial of an excuse on one occasion does something irreparable to a student's course grade.

(3.) … so it is in students' interests to hand in something, even if it is only a piece of paper with one's name on it.

This is another safety-valve built into the assignment. Students' papers are entered into my gradebook as the proof of attendance, but of course, there is always the chance that a student does not manage to write a short paper and still wishes to attend. Some students who have not read the reading see class attendance as a way to catch up, as an incentive to re-engage with course material, and as better than nothing, a way to learn even if they fell behind in the reading schedule. They are not

performing perfectly, but they are participating and in a way that merits some recognition as well. I instituted the rule that they could hand in a piece of paper with their name on it at the end of class, and as an afterthought, added, "You can write on it in the course of class as well, if a question or textual point comes to you while attending." This yielded far better results than I expected; I had unintentionally generated "one-minute paper" style responses to the day's class on the part of students whose very lack of preparation for the day gave them a distinctive perspective on what was made clear by the discussions of their better-prepared classmates, and what was not.[24] The value of those partial papers to the students and to me moved me to formalize partial credit for them in the rubric I used for assessment (see Appendix A).

(4) …it must be clearly and directly tied to a text by indicating a sentence or passage quoted from the text, and the page number on which the sentence or passage was found.

The most heavy-handed structural requirement that I imposed on my students in the design of QFCs has remained through the years in every iteration of the task. Although a few students occasionally grumble against this at first ("You're a stickler for detail," one student commented), a frank discussion in every class as to why this element is important to the quality of the work results in better supported claims in all student writing. We discuss the differences between interpretive claims and descriptive claims, and I point to the strength of an attribution that can be demonstrated with evidence from the text. I state bluntly that I wish to help them avoid errors on higher-stakes papers in the coming months by ensuring excellent documentation of their sources right away, and the students embrace the idea of avoiding later errors quickly. Scaffolded writing assignments are no longer news, and with every passing year I appreciate more the importance of the evidence that "frequent low-stakes writing improves high-stakes writing,"[25] but like many instructors I started out with the belief that students could or should already know how to document sources for claims.[26] Perhaps they should, but ensuring that they know what I want from them is a responsibility I can easily live up to by assigning this task in the first week of

the term. Of course, which selection to cite is trickier. It is odd to students accustomed to comprehensive exams that I want them to demonstrate engagement with a very small selection from pages of reading. How to decide which selection they might choose is part of the next element.

(5) *Not only should a selection and a page number appear, but a philosophical question about the selection or its context should be supplied.*

This takes some of the more difficult and interesting work of the first class meeting. Most of my students are not majors in philosophy, and they ask, immediately, "How do I know what a *philosophical* question is? And how do I know which passage to query if we read twenty pages?" These are great questions! In a way, I hope they never stop asking. It's exactly what I want them to think when they hear a politician give a televised address or when they read an online blog's strident argument; what is at issue, where to direct their attentions, and what sorts of probing is available, are important metacognitive considerations that should recur forever.

It is necessary to work out what a philosophical question might be during the first class meeting. To come to some understanding of them as a group, I provide students a handout containing a short reading. Students are given quiet time to read a few unfamiliar sentences, then encouraged to write any question they think of about any aspect of any sentence in the passage. They are told in advance that some questions tend to seek historical or empirical information: "Was this written during the French Revolution?" "Was this author talking about his own children?" For the purposes of the in-class exercise, I tell them they can jot those questions down, but they should also come up with questions that rely more on working out ambiguities, interpretations, or implications of particular statements and word choices in the paragraph handed out. The results tend to capture many sorts of philosophical questions, and the multiple sorts of analyses they provide often generate a list of types of questions they ask that day and can ask in future homeworks. When I perceive that more than half of the students have finished writing something down, I begin asking them to share their questions. The remainder of the first class

meeting, we review what types of questions they asked that seemed to get to the important philosophical aspects of a reading.[27]

As an example, on the first day of a course in ethical theory, students were provided an excerpt of a passage written by Immanuel Kant regarding duties to animals. When I first introduced this exercise, I was most nervous about this stage of the first class meeting; after all, I initially introduced this task to avoid an utter lack of oral participation, and here I was announcing that they could all read in silence as long as necessary. I need not have worried. Students bent their attention to this first philosophical task, and although their paces varied, more than half were jotting notes down within five minutes. After ten minutes, most seemed to have peaked in their writing and were enhancing single questions with speculative answers and supplementary requests. I pledged to students still reading and writing that they were welcome to continue working quietly as others began the discussion, and asked for volunteers. Students have given me permission to share their early results:

> *How does Kant define duties?*
>
> *What is the difference between a direct and an indirect duty? Are the direct ones only to humans? We read a little of him last year and I don't remember anything about this.*
>
> *Is he saying animals aren't moral agents, and but then he says a service dog deserves reward. Can a dog deserve something when he's not sentient?*
>
> *He's not saying all euthanasia of pets is wrong, is he?*
>
> *I lost track of what he means by cruelty. Is it when pain is caused, or when the dog is killed even if not in a painful way. I think he changed his meaning.*
>
> *Why explain the pain of dogs by saying it will hurt people, isn't it bad enough that pain is bad? Pain's always wrong, isn't it? This even need explaining?*

I did not anticipate being able to answer all their questions with respect to the content of the philosophical view, although I sketched quick answers. I promised to return to the substance of the view at the next meeting, and instead, directed students' attention to the sorts of questions being asked.

Questioning whether Kant would be committed to a view that all pet euthanasia is wrong is a way of drawing out implications of a view. Questioning the possible shift of the meaning of 'cruelty' in one passage is a way of sorting out ambiguities and equivocations of meaning. Definitions of duty or desert are questions seeking clarification, probing the assumptions and views of the philosopher. Students noted what sorts of questions were promising for philosophical engagement, and were advised that these were good models for writing questions at home. In the ethics class, these students spent the most time working out what sort of question is evinced in the final sample ("*Why*…?"), pressing the necessity for justification, a form of meta-analysis with which some students strongly sympathized and others expressed a desire to resist. I encouraged future questions challenging the justification for an argument's existence, pointing out that philosophers regularly challenge the import of a view, but I closed the class by urging students who choose the project-challenging question to consider working out why an author might have reasons to believe a line of reasoning worth doing, taking the opportunity to introduce the principle of charity.

By the end of the first class, a sizable minority usually takes the opportunity for oral participation. I then requested that everyone turn in the paper they'd written on, with their name on it, and explain that everyone's questions would count toward credit for participation, whether they had spoken or not.

(6) *Thoughtful and excellently prepared quotes supply a reason the student is asking that question…*

Students have a variety of motivations for taking a course, for reading an assigned text, or for writing out the homework for attendance credit. If a student is thinking entirely instrumentally, they may just grab a line or two from the text and ask a question about it entirely to get the assignment out of the way. So the element above and the element below end up being the bulk of the assignment. Instrumental thinkers will get partial credit for grinding out an obligatory question, but students

motivated by their own reasons for curiosity, or confusion, or opposition, generally tend to have a clear and sincere reason for asking the question. Here, reference to the type of question they are asking tends to recur, as reasons for asking may start out with frank statements of affect ("This confused me") and then be followed with a reference to a question type ("I think I'm asking for clarification on the way he uses this term"). When we concertedly discuss this reason-providing aspect of the assignment in class, I point out that this is the point at which they can identify why the question matters to understanding the text, what import the answer would have for the author. When the 'reason' moves the student to offer a justification for saying that their question matters, for their own understanding and perhaps even for the sensibility of the main argument, then it becomes clearer to the student why asking a question about one passage is a good way to better understand the reading on the whole.

In introductory classes, I found it necessary to provide sample reasons, and to include the possibility that one reason for asking a question is one's own lack of comprehension; especially at first, students are not just permitted but *encouraged* to let me know if their reason for the question they offer is, "I did not understand this at all," as long as they additionally provided some self-assessment as to how understanding their chosen passage mattered to getting the gist of the argument. Affective responses can be very strong at this point in the assignment; one student's reason for asking if Kant is averring that women are less rational than men was simply, "I'm asking because if he's saying that, then I think I hate this." This response is fair game in the early stages of the term. I urge students to work out the import of affective reasons in the final element of the assignment, described below.

(7) …and further, hazard an educated guess as to the answer. By an educated guess, I mean a guess informed by the text, so the best QFCs will include a quote from another point in the text to support one's own answer to one's own question.

Of all the aspects of the QFC, this one is the hardest sell on the first day of class. "You want me to answer my own question? Why would I ask it if I knew the answer?" I love getting this question.

Answering it is my opportunity to further develop their understanding of what a philosophical question might be. The questions with the most room for interpretation, I suggest, may be the ones that can only be answered by an inference. We read so many pages in which the author has left clues all over as to his or her reasons for a view, or assumptions about the world. In the interests of making sure we tried to understand the author, tried our level best to be accurate about our descriptions of what they are saying, we should have to work hard to make sure that we can connect a line from elsewhere in the text to the line in which we find opportunity for argument. In short, I am arguing that the principle of charity takes patient sifting through the other sentences to see if the author provided helpful clues as to the answer to the mysteries of the initially chosen passage. It is good Socratic method to find a way to challenge key lines. But challenge isn't enough. I ask the students to try to answer their own question by looking for a relevant line elsewhere in the text so that they can work out for themselves, before they come to class, whether or not their challenge is a fair one. It may be easily answered.

Happily for all of us, it usually is not. Knowing what sorts of questions may be most fruitful for the completion of the assignment, students tend to come back with complex questions. Their questions are not always on the mark; although the pressure to have the right answer is reduced, the students report finding it challenging that they must read the assigned text and write the QFC before I talk about the reading in class. Taking risks that they are not reading with perfect comprehension is not equally comfortable for everyone. I want them to take risks, to tell me what they are uncertain about when revealing uncertainty is difficult, but I am interested in providing the students with the sense that the course is a safe place in which to take the risks, so the opportunities to succeed are multiple and the grade for each assignment is a small part of the total course grade, a low-stakes risk. In fact, it is so low-stakes that I am routinely surprised at the solidity of students' works. They really do, as I state in my hopes in the QFC prompt, evince learning more than I am even assessing.

Students also evince more interest in control over the *teaching* of the course, as the term goes on, a result that may not be equally comfortable for everyone; at first, it was uncomfortable to me that a class session would be pre-occupied with the students' choices of questions rather than my neatly written lecture notes. The students' aims were not always mine, and in the first term or two that I relied on this assignment, I found that I didn't always get to the material that I thought most important. I have become more comfortable with the extent to which our aims differ, however, and I now believe that they ought to differ. The content that I believe most important to address is not always the matter that students most need to discuss; when my points *are* more important than any students' questions, I either stop at the halfway mark in a course to identify them, or I check with students to see who wrote about the particular passages of the reading I plan to address. I rarely have to stop discussing students' work to get to my lecture notes, however. It is far more often the case that a student has asked about precisely that which I thought important to cover. My students' aims are not always mine, but our aims usually coincide. What they end up learning and doing is not always what I set out to teach, but the students end up more active learners. In yielding some control, I have become a better teacher.

The experiences that stayed with the students who did the paper version of this assignment, in classes of 30 students or fewer, included the times when other students responded to their writing. Since I was calling on individuals to read the start of their QFC aloud, students were prepared for the class to hear their choice of passage to query, but less predictable were the times when other students shared their interest in the same passage, or had related questions about similar points. As Richard Light observed of his interviews with Harvard seniors, "Students identify the courses that had the most profound impact on them as courses in which they wrote papers, not just for the professor, as usual, but for their fellow students as well."[28] The meaningfulness to students of writing to their fellow students influenced my choices when I was faced with a larger, more introductory course of over 80 students.

Appendix C contains the result, a more simplified and more aggressively flipped version of the QFC. Outside of the class, and on a day between the days in which class met in person, students were assigned to complete online postings of modified QFCs to a Blackboard discussion page that all the other students could also see. In other words, everyone's homework was visible to everyone else. (Grades, of course, were not revealed to public view.) Since Blackboard provided me the option to track upvoting on questions, in larger classes I devised a further credit system for students assigned to a group that, instead of posting for the week, could rate a question on how much they wished me to answer it in the next class meeting; students could give one star for "Ditto this question," two stars for "I want this answered in class," and three stars for "I *need* this answered in class." This was the semester that I ceased writing anything like lecture notes. Instead, my students were telling me what to prioritize, and the "lecture" ended up a selection of some students' questions, featured on PowerPoint slides projected in front of the class at the next meeting. Some of the featured questions were those that I thought important to get to, because they got to the heart of what a lecture would have featured anyway, and some were questions the students rated highly for me to get to.

Although the slides were anonymized, student engagement with this was strong. It was remarkable how much a student leapt to attention when part of their own homework was on the projection screen for all to see. Again, in the interests of students with anxiety or mutism feeling safe, I went over the reasons for this assignment with all students on the first day, assured them that slides would always be anonymized, and encouraged them to take the lead in whether or not to identify themselves as the authors of the QFC. Students who chose to remain anonymous could easily do so. The high rate at which students eagerly announced their authorship was unexpected to me, however. ("That's my question. Can I clarify why I asked that question?") Even otherwise reticent students often could not seem to resist raising their hand to self-identify as the questioner, sometimes just to elaborate on why they were asking, sometimes to steer another student toward better understanding the slide.

Students who chose to remain silent exhibited high attention to the discussion of their words on the screen in front of the room. More than half of my students commented to me after that semester that they began ramping up their efforts to ask a good question on the homework, because they wanted their question chosen for the next class. Temporary fame may not be the best reason to do an assignment, but enjoyment is a good motivator. And I was never bored.

Conclusion

I continue to modify the QFC assignment every year. Students at different points in their university education have different levels of preparation requiring levels of complexity in the fourth year that I do not always assign to students in their first or second year. Students in classes of over 100 students do not expect to be required to participate, and what it means to meaningfully engage them in the meeting of so many people is different from what it means to expect every attendant of a small seminar to talk. And in all courses in which I use the QFC in some form, front-loaded work is required on my part in order to set up schedules outlining when these are due, Blackboard pages hosting the threads for online iterations, and extended attention in the first meeting of a term to clear elaborations of my expectations for the assignment and my reasons for those expectations. On the whole, though, I find my work easier; although my essay describes an approach that involves quite a bit of marking short assignments, as it turns out my students do more and I do less than I did before developing this task. I reap the dividends in time saved when longer assignments and major works do not require me to repeatedly correct documenting sources, and when my email inbox has fewer requests for excused absences or challenges to participation grades. By far the happiest consequence for me is the opportunity to get to know my quietest students, whose participation enriches my class, and my appreciation of how much they have to offer.

Appendix A: Rubric for grading individual paper QFCs (1 to 15 points possible)

	1 point	2 points	3 points
Attendance	Present (student name recorded on paper)	Present, and submission written during class, ready by discussion's end.	Present, prepared for class, submission printed and ready to hand in before discussion begins.
Direct Quotation, correctly sourced	Evidence of reading or listening, some omissions or mistakes in content.	Identifiable point from the reading, correctly written, locatable.	Very good choice of clearly identifiable quote, with some philosophical import.
Question About selected passage	Present, may have some omissions or mistakes in understanding.	Clear and understandable, relevant to philosophical argument.	Aims to advance understanding of some complexity, critical to author's argument, points to philosophical import.
Reason for asking that question	Present, clearly connected to question	Clear and understandable, relevant to philosophical argument.	Clear and reflective, indicating appreciation of why the question is philosophical, or what type of question it is, addresses some complexity, points to philosophical import.
Educated guess as to answer	At least partially present, may have some omissions or mistakes in understanding.	Clear, referring to at least one other quote in the reading, correctly interpreted.	Contextualized with reference to broader themes and other quotes in the reading.

Appendix B: QFC for Online Homework between class meetings

Instructions: Refresh your memory on the "Types of Questions" handout. Re-read it and note the boldface types.

Then read the readings scheduled to be discussed in the next class. Remember that the first time through a new reading, you can skim it to get the gist of it. The second time you read it, slow down and consider what types of questions come to your mind as you read. Select just a sentence or short passage from any of the reading(s), about which you could ask a question about any philosophical aspect of the selection.

When you are ready to do the online homework, go to the Discussion page and click on the Forum name appropriate for the week. On the next page, click Create A Thread. Number the parts of your answers according to the following:

1. Answer my question from class. This is a lot easier to do if you come to class. Students who don't come to class can still do the rest of this assignment, but will be unable to do this first one unless you read the BB posts of others. You're welcome to do so. It takes extra work, which you are saved by coming to class.

2. Write out a question that fits this week's Type Of Question, the choice of which was announced in class. No need to answer it, I just want you to imagine a possible good question of the assigned type.

3. At last, room for creativity: Ask me any question about your selection from the reading, and write your selection into the post word-for-word. To do this perfectly, provide the sentence or sentences you have selected, then provide the source (page number or section) of the portion you are citing. (All the articles I provided have page numbers. Find them!)

4. Write out your question about any philosophical aspect of the selection you quote in #3 above.

5. Write out just a one- or two-sentence answer of your own to your own question. These are supposed to be educated guesses, so they are best when supplemented by an additional quote from the reading.

This is a lot of work, isn't it? Yet it is deliberately designed to get you to tinker with the details of a complicated text. QFCs prepare students to participate in class, suggest to the instructor which topics to include in lecture, and provide practice in close reading and philosophical writing. Every student can see each student's QFC, so the QFC writers of each week must aim for respectful questioning about a quote or two from the reading, and discuss the material in a way which all the others can understand. The rubric for grading these posts is always available on the Course Content page.

Appendix C: Rubric for grading QFC posts online

	Points: 1	Points: 2	Points: 3	Points: 4
1. Answered my question from class	Partially correct	Generally correct, meets Expectations for writing at this course-level	Correct and accurate, additional insights offered, meets and sometimes exceeds expectations for writing at this course-level	Excellent, Advanced complexity and accuracy, additional insights offered, exceeds expectations for writing at this course-level
2. Your iteration of this week's Type Of Question	Present, may have some omissions or mistakes in understanding.	Clear and understandable, relevant to philosophical argument.	Aims to advance understanding of some complexity, philosophical import.	Clear, identifiable, perfectly written, insightful of complexity, crucial to textual interpretation.
3. Direct Quote, correctly sourced	Evidence of reading, some omissions or mistakes in content.	Identifiable point from the reading, correctly written, locatable.	Very good choice of clearly identifiable quote, with some philosophical import.	Clearly identifiable, perfectly written, crucial to textual interpretation.
4. Your question about quote in #3	Present, may have some omissions or mistakes in understanding.	Clear and understandable, relevant to philosophical argument.	Aims to advance understanding of some complexity, philosophical import.	Clear, identifiable, perfectly written, insightful of complexity, crucial to textual interpretation.
5. Educated guess as to answer to #4	At least partially present, may have some omissions or mistakes in understanding.	Clear, referring to at least one other quote in the reading, correctly interpreted.	Contextualized with reference to broader themes and other quotes in the reading.	Wisely identifies multiple possible interpretations, contextualized with other quotes in the reading.

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[1] As I discuss in Part One, there are those who argue that in fact we should not take attendance at all, but after reading their anti-attendance arguments, I suspect that they would agree with the spirit of this essay; tracking students’ engagement activities and learning turns out to involve assessing, among other things, what they often

do in the classroom. See, for arguments against taking attendance, Daryl Close (2009), especially the subsection, "Attendance," 385-387. Cf. the widely cited article by David Romer (1993); Romer's article includes the subsection, "Should Attendance Be Mandatory?" and offers a cautious affirmative (173-74).

[2] Research suggests that the prevalence rates of social anxiety in the U.S. and Canada are comparable, with a lifetime prevalence rate of about 13% and a one-year prevalence rate of about 7% (Kessler et al (2005)). Selective mutism in youths is almost always comorbid with social anxiety, and while usually diagnosed in childhood, can continue into teen and adult ages for those with severe social anxiety (Sutton 2015; Carl Sutton founded iSpeak, and readers are encouraged to look at their excellent website for further information and, if you need it, help (www.ispeak.org.uk)). Although the literature on social anxiety in adults and selective mutism in youth is robust, available research on their ramifications for students in postsecondary education is a bit thin; perhaps those of us motivated to write about higher education, that is, those who self-select into professorship, tend to be less likely to relate to being incapable of speaking in a classroom. Relatedly, psychologists Phil Topham and Graham Russell (2012) note that "although it is distressing and causes disengagement from learning, there is limited objective evidence about the impact of social anxiety on academic performance in higher education," and they explore the question, "Given its prevalence and impact, why has social anxiety not received more attention by universities and colleges?" They suggest that social anxiety in students "may be attributed" by faculty "to shyness, being viewed as a personality trait rather than a problem. And it is not obviously distressing" when students' "substantial anxieties in learning situations were concealed until asked to present their work to peers and tutors. There may be an implicit belief in the academic community that anxiety is intrinsic to the process of learning, whereby overcoming academic challenges builds confidence and fears of social evaluation recede… In this climate, the perception of the socially anxious student, ashamed to ask for help, is that the university and its staff are - albeit unintentionally - unsympathetic to their concerns." See also Ameringen et al (2003), and Rocca (2010). Consideration of student struggles prior to the postsecondary level are also taken up by Strahan (2003).

[3] Although we arrived at related insights separately, I am grateful to Jessey Wright for articulating his "recommendations for broadening our definition of student participation in the classroom;" see Wright (2014).

[4] Concepción 2004, 352.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Close 2009, 385.

[7] Ibid., 387.

[8] Balas 2000, 122.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Esquith 1988, 195.

[11] Ibid., 198.

[12] Veale 2003, 258.

[13] Topham and Russell 2012, 280.

[14] Samokhvalov et al 2012.

[15] Meyer 2009; although I relied on his published dissertation for the information in this paragraph, his more recent co-authored publications reprise some of this (see Meyer and Hunt 2011, Meyer et al. 2011).

[16] Meyer 2009; see also Wood 1996.

[17] McCrickerd 2012, 278, 282.

[18] My concern that some students come to class unprepared with knowledge of reading assignments is not easily separated from my concern that students who are prepared do not always find it possible to talk in class, and to this day, I tend to organize the assignment described here around a reading assignment. It is out of the scope of this essay to consider all the other possible participation-evoking activities that one could devise in the absence of a reading assignment, so I will only be considering, in this essay, the reasons for and the results of the text-centered assignment I have devised.

[19] Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 2004, 19: "Unless students write notes or papers about reading assignments or talk about them in discussion, they will quickly forget most of what they read."

[20] Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 2004, 27.

[21] Ibid.

[22] I should note that this history is not the only story available to us, and that much pedagogical work has been done to encourage a variety of approaches to philosophy. Still, it took work. See especially Rooney (2010), Cohen (1995), and Swartz (1994).

[23] Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 2004, 134. They cite for evidence of this assumption the study by Carol Trosset (1998). Trosset's concerns about approaches to discussion are consistent with Cohen's (1995), when he ruefully reflects that professors feed into their students' "insufferable" wielding of weapons of argumentation.

[24] Some evidence for the usefulness of one-minute papers or "half-sheets" is summarized in Stead (2005). I continue to rely on my QFC papers for attendance and participation, more than I do on in-class writing for everyone, especially in seminar-style courses; like some of the instructors quoted in the review, however, I find that larger courses sometimes benefit from the reverse, more reliance on in-class writing and supplemented by QFCs.

[25] McKeachie and Svinicki 2006, 194.

[26] At least I have company, as evinced by Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004) reporting, "Whatever students can't or don't do well in a history, sociology, or economics assignment, they should have learned, teachers say, in their freshman writing courses, if not in high school English. Our colleagues in other departments express genuine bewilderment" (2). I resemble this remark.

[27] More recently, I provide students a pointer to free online excerpts of the six "types of questions" identified by Richard Paul (1990). The types that Paul identifies are Questions for clarification, Questions that probe assumptions, Questions that probe reasons and evidence, Questions about Viewpoints and Perspectives, Questions that probe implications and consequences, and Questions about a question.

[28] Light 2001, 64.