

PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE FOR BEGINNERS: USING PWOL DIALOGUES TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RACE AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the practice of dialogue in ancient philosophical schools, the Philosophy as a Way of Life (PWOL) Project at the University of Notre Dame has sought to put dialogue back at the center of philosophical pedagogy. Impromptu philosophical dialogue, however, can be challenging for students who are new to philosophy. Anticipating this challenge, the Project has created a series of manuals to help instructors conduct dialogue groups with novice philosophy students. Using these guidelines, we incorporated PWOL-style dialogue groups into our Spring 2021 course “The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender” with the hope that, through having conversations about these challenging topics, our students would both be able to practice having philosophical dialogues as well as form their views on race and gender in light of contributions from their diverse peers. This article examines several strategies for how instructors can seek to incorporate similar dialogues into their own introductory classrooms.

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Philosophy is above all a way of life, but one which is intimately linked to philosophical discourse.

–Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

INTRODUCTION

1 Pierre Hadot, founder of the contemporary movement to rediscover philosophy
2 as a way of life, thought that philosophy was not just an isolated, theoretical
3 endeavor.¹ Rather, Hadot held that for the ancients philosophy was deeply com-
4 munal. Students embarked on their philosophical journeys by choosing which
5 school they would belong to and then began to reflect with others how to best
6 bring together the philosophical and the practical. Thus, from the very begin-
7 ning, the philosophical life was shot through with community, making philo-
8 sophical reflection “intimately linked to philosophical discourse.”²

9
10 Due to Hadot’s emphasis on philosophical discourse, one of the key components
11 of philosophy as a way of life (PWOL) classrooms are small group philosophical
12 dialogues, dialogues that help students process and apply philosophical insights
13 to their everyday lives. According to the Philosophy as a Way of Life Project at
14 the University of Notre Dame, “the goal of a classroom philosophical dialogue is
15 to build a focused community where, over the course of the semester, students
16 can better understand their views on the good life [and] help classmates to do
17 the same.”³ The most important aspect of PWOL dialogues is that students
18 come to “better understand their views on the good life.” Instead of leaving phi-
19 losophy as a bunch of abstract conceptual puzzles, dialogue groups are meant
20 to help students process and apply philosophical theories to their lives. Just
21 like for participants in the ancient philosophical schools, sustained philosophi-
22 cal discourse creates the sort of community where this growth can occur.

23
24 Despite the value of philosophical dialogue, such conversations can be very chal-
25 lenging for novice philosophy students. Not only do students often not know
26 how to contribute to philosophical discussions, but the subject matter of phi-
27 losophy courses can also be both intellectually and existentially intimidating,
28 discouraging students from striking up philosophical conversations of their own
29 accord. We encountered both of these challenges in our Spring 2021 course “The
30 Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender”. Because the course was an elective with
31 no prerequisites, many of our students had not previously taken a philosophy

¹See Hadot (1995) and (2002). For work that has promoted further adoption of the philosophy as a way of life paradigm, see Chase, Clark, and McGee (2013); Cooper (2012a) and (2012b); Flynn (2005); Grimm and Cohoe (2021); the 2020 special issue of *Metaphilosophy*, edited by Ambury, Irani, and Wallace; the *Guides to the Good Life* series from Oxford University Press; and the *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers* series from Princeton University Press.

²See Hadot (2002), p. 4.

³See the Philosophy as a Way of Life Project website at <<https://philife.nd.edu/key-principles/student-led-dialogue/>>.

32 course and were not familiarly with philosophical dialogue. Furthermore, our
33 students brought a number of fears about participating in discussions on race
34 and gender, including that they would accidentally say something racist or sex-
35 ist⁴ or that they would open themselves up to bullying or verbal abuse.⁵

36
37 In order to help our students adopt the practice of philosophical dialogue, we
38 created semester-long, PWOL-style dialogue groups to accompany our course.
39 Using training materials created by the Philosophy as a Way of Life Project, and
40 supported by an Innovation in Teaching grant from the *American Association of*
41 *Philosophy Teachers*, we adopted several elements of the PWOL approach with
42 the hope that the PWOL methodology could be fruitfully applied to helping
43 introductory philosophy students discuss challenging topics like the philosophy
44 of race and gender.⁶ In this paper, we outline all of the elements of PWOL
45 dialogues that we incorporated into our classroom, including the format, con-
46 tent, and results of our dialogue groups. In Sections 1 and 2, we share how
47 both PWOL dialogues and our race and gender dialogues focused on living the
48 good life out in community. We then describe, in Sections 3 through 5, how stu-
49 dents planned most of the questions and activities associated with our dialogue
50 groups, before concluding in Section 6 by considering how to handle conflict
51 and disagreement in the dialogue setting. PWOL-style dialogue groups were a
52 great fit for our course, and we hope that our experiences will encourage others
53 to implement dialogue groups with newcomers in their philosophy classrooms.

54 55 ELEMENT 1: LIVING PHILOSOPHICALLY

56 1.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH

57 The first, and most important, element of PWOL dialogues is the Philosophy
58 as a Way of Life approach itself. Instead of portraying philosophy as simply an
59 exercise in solving abstract problems, the PWOL approach to philosophy invites
60 students to reflect on the connections between philosophy and how to live well.
61 As pointed out by Hadot, one important aspect of learning to live the good life is
62 active philosophical dialogue. In traditional, lecture-style classrooms, students
63 get few, if any, opportunities to actively work out how the course material might
64 be applied to their own lives. Instead, they are often just expected to record and
65 memorize information.⁷ This format, of course, undermines the central PWOL
66 goal of having students reflect on how philosophy might affect their everyday
67 actions. In order to avoid this difficulty, PWOL dialogues bring together small
68 groups of students for sustained conversations focused on the question, “What

⁴See Sue and Constantine (2007), Sue et al. (2009), Sue et al. (2010), Sue (2016), and Young (2003).

⁵See Hurtado (1992), Sue and Constantine (2007), and Sue et al. (2011).

⁶For all the resources we used in creating our dialogue groups, including the Dialogue Facilitator Instructor Manual (2021a), Trainee Manual (2021b), and Trainee Workbook (2021c), see the Philosophy as a Way of Life Dialogue Resources portal at <<https://bit.ly/3rVMaCH>>.

⁷For in-depth critiques of the “banking” model of education, see Freire (1970) and Hooks (1994).

69 is a good life, and how can we live it?”⁸

70 1.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER

71 There are three central ways in which a course on race and gender, carried
72 out using the PWOL dialogue structure, contributes to the good life. First,
73 we wanted our students to be prepared for the difficult conversations necessary
74 for creating healthy, productive relationships. A human life without stable and
75 lasting companionship is lacking in meaningful ways, and we should not end re-
76 lationships whenever we find ourselves on opposite sides of a controversial issue.
77 Questions related to race and gender are among the most controversial contem-
78 porary issues, and relationships are regularly strained on the basis of diverging
79 views on these topics. In learning to clearly communicate their ideas, charitably
80 reconstruct the views of others, and calmly address points of disagreement, stu-
81 dents build skills necessary for developing stronger, longer lasting relationships.

82
83 Secondly, we wanted our students to develop their own understanding of the
84 role that race and gender should (or should not) play in shaping their personal
85 identity. A large number of students came into the course with no explicit views
86 on the role that their race or gender ought to play in living a good life. There
87 is a danger, however, in being insufficiently reflective in how we engage with
88 these aspects of our identity. We may, for example, allow our race or gender to
89 unconsciously structure our interactions by dictating the way that we present
90 ourselves to others. The key question, of course, is whether we should allow
91 race and gender to play this role. Our intention was not to suggest that either
92 answer is correct, but we wanted our students to ask, and answer, what role
93 these parts of their identities play in a well-lived life.

94
95 Lastly, we wanted our students to be able to act in ways that are duly sensitive
96 to race and gender. We obviously wanted our students to avoid being racist
97 and sexist, but there are vocal criticisms regarding trying to be race- or gender-
98 blind as well. How, then, should we treat those around us that may be come
99 from different social identities? Like Aristotle’s archer shooting an apple off of
100 someone’s head, it will do us well to know what we need to miss *and* what we
101 want to hit. Treating others with respect in these sensitive areas is not simply a
102 matter of good intentions, and learning how to respect the differences of others
103 will help our students to become better people and lead better lives.

104 ELEMENT 2: BUILDING COMMUNITY

105 2.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH

106 Along with focusing on living good lives, the goal of PWOL dialogue groups is
107 to “build a focused community.” Students are far better at connecting philos-

⁸This guiding question is at the basis of all PWOL dialogue groups – see the PWOL Dialogue Instructor Manual (2021a), p. 8.

108 ophy with their everyday lives when they do so together. It is difficult enough
109 to think philosophically in isolation, much less apply those thoughts to how to
110 act in a particular situation. Having discussion partners to brainstorm with
111 greatly increases the chances that students will be able to draw these connec-
112 tions. Furthermore, creating a close-knit community also helps students become
113 more comfortable sharing their views. Without the mutual understanding found
114 within a warm, familiar community, many students might opt to not share their
115 unique perspectives at all.

116
117 Because of this focus on building community, PWOL dialogue groups not only
118 differ from courses based only around lectures, but they also are importantly dis-
119 tinct from the typical philosophy discussion section. With large lecture courses,
120 many universities reserve a day of class time for small group discussion sections.
121 Oftentimes, the primary purpose of these sections is to help students master
122 the course content by giving them a chance to ask questions about the materi-
123 al. For this reason, discussion sections are often led by graduate students who
124 frequently intervene in the conversation to correct student errors and answer
125 questions.

126
127 PWOL dialogue groups, on the other hand, aim at helping students develop
128 their own perspectives and understand the views of their classmates. Instead
129 of constantly answering questions and correcting errors, dialogue leaders are
130 instead tasked with helping maintain an environment where students can have
131 fruitful conversations with their peers. PWOL dialogue groups are often led by
132 the students themselves, as they are best positioned to connect with other stu-
133 dents and build a strong sense of community. This, then, brings the difference
134 between PWOL dialogue groups and the typical philosophy discussion section
135 into stark relief, as peer-led dialogues are a significant departure from having
136 graduate students stand in for the professor.

137
138 PWOL dialogues also help students take ownership of the dialogue conversation
139 by encouraging them to make their own rules of discussion. During the first
140 dialogue session, students create their own conversational norms, guidelines that
141 then make them more comfortable sharing their perspectives. Norms like the
142 following can help students understand the rules of engagement, making them
143 more likely to contribute to the dialogue:⁹

- 144 • **Use “I” Statements:** When expressing a feeling, telling a story, or
145 navigating a conflict, always express statements from the first person point
146 of view rather than making accusations or blaming others. Say “I feel
147 _____, when _____,” not “You did _____ and that’s bad.”

⁹Creating conversational norms is also suggested by researchers working on intergroup dialogues. Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig (2002), for example, advocate creating a set of shared group norms, while Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013) suggest having dialogue participants themselves reach these conversational guidelines together.

- 148 • **Don't Just Jump in When the Water's Warm:** Challenge yourself
149 to share your reaction even when you disagree or don't relate.
- 150 • **Names Stay, Ideas Leave:** Honor confidentiality by continuing to dis-
151 cuss interesting talking points outside of the classroom, but do so without
152 attaching participants' names to stories or beliefs.

153 After creating their own personalized set of norms, students often feel more
154 comfortable sharing, and sharing at a deeper level. The increase in contributions
155 then leads to a growing sense of familiarity, further contributing to building a
156 close community within the dialogue group. These norms, of course, are just
157 a few of those that students considered adopting for their dialogue groups. A
158 full list of potential group norms can be found in the Dialogue Leader Trainee
159 Manual.¹⁰

160 2.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER

161 The PWOL focus on building community was a crucial element in making our
162 course a success. Our students came into the classroom with fears about sharing
163 their perspectives, anxieties that could have easily prevented them from hav-
164 ing productive conversations. Some students were worried that they would be
165 misunderstood and labeled a racist or sexist:¹¹

166 **What would you say is the most challenging aspect of discussing** 167 **issues surrounding race, class, and gender?**

- 168 • "I always feel as if I may say something wrong that may label me as a
169 racist or misogynist"
- 170 • "People are afraid to share their opinions that could potentially hurt others
171 or make them look a certain way, whether that could be sexist or racist"
- 172 • "The accidental slip up on either side of the conversation where words are
173 used that sound racist but weren't intended to be racist"
- 174 • "The fear that if I say something that someone doesn't agree with that
175 I'll get [...] labeled as a racist simply for holding opposing views"

176 Other students were worried that, because of their particular social identity,
177 their views would be dismissed:

178 **What would you say is the most challenging aspect of discussing** 179 **issues surrounding race, class, and gender?**

¹⁰See the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 17-18.

¹¹The fears reported here were collected as a part of our efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of PWOL methodology. As part of the course structure, students responded to both pre- and post-course surveys, with the ultimate goal of seeing how students grew throughout the course.

- 180 • “I think the most difficult thing about discussing issues surrounding race,
181 gender, and class is when people disregard or don’t validate my personal
182 experiences as a member of a marginalized community and form opinions
183 without listening to people who are hurt and face real consequences”
- 184 • “I’ve been in a conversation where my opinion was considered moot due
185 to my race, sex, and perceived class standing”
- 186 • “As a Black woman, I have a unique perspective regarding this topic. It’s
187 something I feel very passionate about because it has always affected my
188 life and, based on the current social conflict in this world, it always will.
189 I feel like it’s really easy for people who don’t face repercussions of being
190 a certain race to say it’s ‘biology’ or race ‘doesn’t exist’”
- 191 • “As a person of color I’m always afraid someone might say something racist
192 like a racial slur or stereotype that would deeply offend me or hurt my
193 feelings. It also hurts when others don’t understand that we can have con-
194 versations with disagreements but not when the opponent’s disagreement
195 is rooted in my oppression”

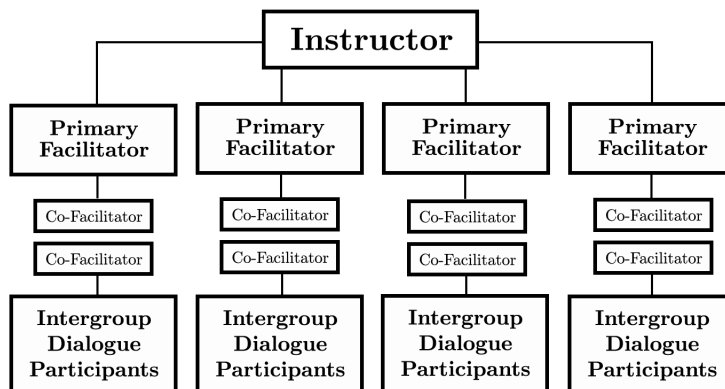
196 Building a safe and welcoming community was crucial for helping our students
197 overcome these concerns. Only then could students openly and honestly com-
198 municate with one another, making the PWOL approach to building community
199 even more important for our course on race and gender.

200
201 In order to build a safe and welcoming environment within our dialogue groups,
202 we took a number of important steps. First, the groups themselves exhibited
203 a good deal of gender and racial diversity. According to demographic data col-
204 lected in 2020 about the entire student body, approximately 42% of students
205 identified as male and 58% of students identified as female, while approximately
206 58% of students identified as white and 42% did not identify as white.¹² Be-
207 cause our course was an elective, many of the students enrolled in our course
208 were already very invested in issues of race and gender and were representative
209 of this greater campus diversity.

210
211 Secondly, in order to give our students a leadership role within their dialogues,
212 each group had the following structure. Once during the semester, each member
213 of the dialogue group would serve as a co-facilitator with one of their classmates.
214 This allowed for a definitive authority structure without the group being dom-
215 inated by any particular person, encouraging the members to build trust by
216 working together to create a positive and productive atmosphere.

¹²Of the students who did not identify as White, approximately 19.9% identified as Hispanic, 9.3% identified as Black, 2.9% identified as Asian, 0.2% identified as American Indian, 0.1% identified as Native Hawaiian, 4% identified as multi-race, 4.6% simply reported that they were non-resident aliens, and a final 1.3% did not respond. For full demographic data, see <https://ir.fsu.edu/facts.aspx>.

218 We then chose two talented undergraduate students and two graduate students
 219 to train students for their co-facilitator responsibilities and monitor every dia-
 220 logue session. These primary facilitators met with co-facilitators before dialogue
 221 each week to make sure that the co-facilitators were prepared to lead a con-
 222 structive conversation. Primary dialogue facilitators were chosen based on their
 223 previous familiarity with PWOL and their preparedness to lead dialogue groups,
 224 though no previous experience is required. Everything needed to train dialogue
 225 facilitators can be found in the Dialogue Facilitator Instructor Manual (2021a),
 226 Trainee Manual (2021b), and Trainee Workbook (2021c). Our two graduate
 227 student facilitators were paid as regular teaching assistants for the course, while
 228 the two undergraduate facilitators were paid through the AAPT Innovation in
 229 Teaching Grant. The full class structure is laid out below in Figure 1:



230

Figure 1: Dialogue Group Structure

231 The third thing we did to build a sense of community within our dialogue groups
 232 was giving each group the opportunity to create their own conversational norms.
 233 As mentioned previously, the co-facilitator’s primary role was not to serve as
 234 the de facto distributor of wisdom but to create the environment needed for
 235 productive conversation. An important part of this responsibility was enforcing
 236 the group norms. These norms were created during the first dialogue session
 237 using the following procedure: Participants were prompted to offer norms, and
 238 if none were forthcoming, primary facilitators suggested example norms to get
 239 the conversation started. Some groups opted to vote on each of the norms,
 240 while, in other cases, all proposed norms were accepted unless someone offered
 241 an objection. By the end of the session, each group had several norms and a
 242 sense of ownership over the dialogue structure, giving participants the founda-
 243 tions of building a productive sense of community.

244

245 To make things a bit more concrete, it will be useful to consider specific norms
 246 that worked for some of our groups from Figure 2. These all demonstrate how
 247 the more general advice outlined above can be applied in a way that is sensitive
 248 to the kinds of issues that might arise when discussing race and gender:

249

Dialogue Norm	Description	Impact
Confidentiality	Nothing shared during dialogue will be repeated outside the group	Students were more honest sharing their perspectives, knowing that they would stay with the group
Charitable Listening	Always assume that group members mean well when sharing, and allow them to clarify if misconstrued	Speakers were willing to contribute even their preliminary thoughts because they knew that they could always elaborate if necessary
Argument Focused	All responses should focus on the arguments made and the reasons given, not the person who contributed them	Participants felt free to share without fear of personal attacks
No Interruptions	Never interrupt the speaker	Students felt equal respect from the group, with all able to share their complete thoughts
No Generalizing	No reasoning about others using generalizations, either positive or negative	Each member of the group was viewed and respected as an individual, with their own unique experiences and perspectives
Follow the Queue	The dialogue facilitator will manage the queue by calling on participants in the order their hands were raised	The conventions for contributing to the conversation were transparent and clear, preventing any bias for comments from certain participants

250

Figure 2: Sample Conversational Norms

251 Co-facilitators were responsible for gently enforcing these norms. This meant
 252 that each dialogue participant took turns as the defender of the norms, further
 253 solidifying their sense of ownership of the way in which the group was run. This
 254 allowed students to actively build the type of community that they want to
 255 be a part of, both by creating and enforcing the guidelines that informed their
 256 conversations.

257

258 All of this focus on student leadership may raise the question of whether the
 259 PWOL dialogue format, while successfully building community, might never-
 260 theless be detrimental to student learning. Wouldn't spending more time with
 261 leadership from non-experts reduce comprehension of the relevant information?
 262 It is important to remember that PWOL dialogues do not simply group stu-
 263 dents together and ask them to talk about whatever they like. Instead, these
 264 conversations are informed by philosophical readings, and the goal is for stu-
 265 dents to take the potentially abstract ideas from these readings and articulate
 266 what they might mean in a practical context. The empirical data on intergroup
 267 dialogue is encouraging, suggesting that dialogues actually facilitate the uptake
 268 of the relevant information. Keehn (2015), for instance, argues that sharing of
 269 personal stories (in the intergroup dialogue context) facilitates the mastery of
 270 the relevant concepts. Weinzimmer and Bergdahl (2018) note that, when com-
 271 pared to large lecture courses, intergroup dialogues actually lead to improved

272 student comprehension. There is thus reason to think that, far from undermin-
273 ing student comprehension, PWOL-style dialogue groups may actually facilitate
274 improved student learning outcomes.

275
276 Nevertheless, instructors might understandably be hesitant to turn over control
277 of the discussion to undergraduate co-facilitators. They could worry that stu-
278 dents do not have the relevant expertise and will both misinform and confuse
279 dialogue participants. In response to this concern, it is important to remember
280 that one of the primary goals of dialogue groups is to allow students to have
281 some input in shaping the classroom. The focus on questions and activities that
282 the presenters find most compelling is one of the benefits of the strategy, as
283 this allows students to discuss issues that they find most relevant and pressing.
284 At the same time, while it is essential to give co-facilitators this space to con-
285 tribute, it is also important to constrain these contributions in ways that help
286 them serve the overall purpose of the dialogue groups. In our case, this is why
287 the planning sessions with the primary facilitator were instrumental. We did not
288 expect students to lead discussions without any guidance, and so we provided
289 them time to work with their primary facilitators to craft their lesson plans.
290 Furthermore, the primary facilitators were present for the entire conversation,
291 available to correct any obvious misunderstandings. This both allowed us to give
292 students space to creatively engage with the subject matter of the course while
293 still providing enough guidance to prevent confusion and misunderstanding.

294 ELEMENT 3: STRONG QUESTIONS

295 3.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH

296 In order for students to successfully facilitate their dialogue group meetings,
297 they need to be able to ask *strong questions*. According to the PWOL Dialogue
298 Trainee Manual, strong questions do a number of things. They “are relevant to
299 the topic at hand, invite reflection, and promote a deeper understanding of a
300 speaker’s remarks and the overall topic. They move the conversation forward
301 and often evoke multiple responses.” This is in contrast to *weak questions*, ques-
302 tions that “elicit a single, right answer or simple ‘yes-or-no’, cut off reflective
303 thinking, and stall the conversational flow.”¹³

304
305 If students try to lead their dialogue groups by just asking weak questions, the
306 discussion might be halting and awkward, leading to shallower conversations,
307 whereas using strong questions will be more likely to create deep and lasting
308 exchanges. Consider a few examples. This first group of questions is relatively
309 weak. Even though they might help get a discussion started, they all have
310 ‘yes-or-no’ answers that might stall the conversational flow:

311 **Weak Questions**

¹³See the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), p. 9.

- 312 • Do you think the truth is important?
- 313 • Does God exist?
- 314 • Are you a Kantian?

315 Now consider some improved, strong questions. These questions all consider the
 316 same topics as our first three, but they are far more likely to spark conversation
 317 and help students engage at a deeper level:

318 **Strong Questions**

- 319 • How do you seek out the truth in your own life and learning habits?
- 320 • Has your religious faith or lack of religious faith ever been chal-
 321 lenged? When?
- 322 • What types of honesty do you see lacking on our campus?¹⁴

323 Students come to the PWOL classroom with a wide range of experiences, and
 324 these questions could potentially give rise to diverging perspectives on truth,
 325 faith, and morality. None of these questions can be answered with a simple
 326 ‘yes-or-no’, and all of them are likely to evoke multiple responses. These differ-
 327 ing opinions will then lead to a rich and rewarding conversation, helping students
 328 to understand both their own perspective and the perspectives of others more
 329 deeply.

330 How do we help students design strong questions of their own? The Dialogue
 331 Trainee Manual (2021b) offers a number of tips. To begin with, co-facilitators
 332 should start with what dialogue participants know. What subjects have recently
 333 been discussed in class, and what topics are students likely ready to discuss?
 334 Questions might also try to draw connections between a philosophical topic
 335 and an everyday experience. For instance, if the dialogue session is considering
 336 whether or not people should belong to an organized religion, then the dialogue
 337 facilitator can initiate the conversation by asking whether the legacy of orga-
 338 nized religion is more positive or negative. Another key factor in asking strong
 339 questions is by asking from a place of genuine curiosity. If the dialogue leader
 340 thinks that a question is interesting, there are likely others in the group that
 341 will find the question interesting as well.¹⁵

343 **3.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER**

344 Co-facilitators were responsible for preparing a number of strong questions be-
 345 fore leading their respective dialogue sessions. Their dialogue lesson plans in-
 346 cluded at least four strong questions, and co-facilitators formulated those ques-
 347 tions with the following explicit advice:

¹⁴More examples of strong questions can be found in the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 34-35.

¹⁵These tips, along with other suggestions for asking strong questions, can be found in the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), p. 9.

- 348 1. Ensure that your questions are not amenable to yes or no answers.
 349 2. Ensure that your questions likely lead to more than one answer.
 350 3. Ensure that your questions encourage reflection instead of immediate or
 351 obvious replies.

352 Once students had planned their strong questions, they then received feedback
 353 from their primary facilitator before their dialogue session. In Figure 3, you will
 354 find some examples of strong questions that students created over the course of
 355 the semester:

Examples of Strong Questions
Were you raised in an environment that enforced traditional gender norms, or were you encouraged to challenge those norms? What did this look like?
After reading about eliminativist views of race, have you reconsidered the role that race plays in your life? Would you act any differently if you believed that race did not exist?
Have you ever been unsure about your gender? What practical consequences did this uncertainty (or lack of uncertainty) have for your day-to-day life?
How do you think your experiences align or fail to align with those of your peers of the same race?

356

Figure 3: Examples of Strong Questions

357 In order to facilitate engagement with these questions, co-facilitators were also
 358 used what we called *think-time strategies*. Think-time strategies are meant to
 359 give dialogue participants a moment to consider what they are going to say -
 360 that is, to invite reflection rather than automatic replies - making think-time
 361 strategies an integral part of having a deep, ongoing dialogue. Here are some
 362 potential think-time strategies that we modeled for our students:

363 **Elaboration:** The co-facilitator begins by asking the question. Then,
 364 while the other participants consider their answers, the facilitator elaborates
 365 on the question by explaining why the question is interesting, important,
 366 or controversial.

367 **Think, Pair, Share:** The co-facilitator organizes all dialogue participants
 368 into pairs, instructing them to share with one another their answers to the
 369 strong question. The group is then brought back together to share the answers
 370 that they discussed with their partners.

371 **Example Answer:** The co-facilitator elaborates on how they would answer
 372 the strong question, getting the discussion going while simultaneously
 373 allowing the other participants time to consider their views.

374 In preparing their lesson plans, co-facilitators were required to design a think-
375 time strategy to pair with each of their strong questions. During their meeting
376 with their primary facilitator, they would then practice these think-time strate-
377 gies, rehearsing how they would lead the group without the primary facilitator’s
378 assistance.

379 ELEMENT 4: ENGAGING ACTIVITIES

380 4.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH

381 Strong questions are most effective when used alongside engaging activities,
382 providing experiences to center the group’s conversation. What might such
383 activities look like? Dialogue facilitators should feel free to be innovative, de-
384 signing activities that they think will get the whole group talking. The first
385 few dialogues should include icebreaker activities, allowing students to get to
386 know one another before they encounter more challenging conversations later in
387 the semester. Closer to the end of the semester, activities can provide dialogue
388 participants the opportunity to reflect on how they have grown throughout the
389 academic term.

390
391 Because it is not always easy to plan engaging activities from scratch, though,
392 the Dialogue Facilitator Trainee Manual (2021b) contains over 25 activities to
393 get students’ creative juices flowing.¹⁶ To give the reader an idea of how these
394 activities might incorporate strong questions, we will describe an example of an
395 activity from the Trainee Manual before discussing how the activity was modi-
396 fied for our Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender course.

397
398 **Take a Stand Activity:** The facilitator begins this activity by telling all par-
399 ticipants that one wall is the ‘Strongly Agree’ wall, the opposite wall is the
400 ‘Strongly Disagree’ wall, and the space in between is a spectrum between the
401 two. They then read a statement and have group members stand in a posi-
402 tion in the room that best represents their opinion. If they agree or strongly
403 agree, they should stand closer to the ‘Strongly Agree’ wall, and if they disagree
404 or strongly disagree, they should stand closer to the ‘Strongly Disagree’ wall.
405 There also should not be any students “on the fence”, standing in the exact
406 middle of the room. To make sure that everyone understands the activity, the
407 facilitator should then conduct a practice round. For example, the facilitator
408 might read the statement “Winter is the best season of the year” and then let
409 participants arrange themselves across the room.

410
411 After students have all chosen a location in the room, the facilitator will then ask
412 a strong question related to the statement. For instance, in the practice round
413 above, the facilitator might ask “Are there any particular experiences that have
414 influenced your reaction to this statement?” or “How do you think your friends

¹⁶See the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 22-33.

415 and family would respond to this statement? Would their perspective be the
416 same as yours?” The facilitator should then allow students to respond to their
417 query. After providing a sufficient amount of time for discussion of the practice
418 statement, the facilitator will then move on to a statement associated with the
419 discussion topic for that particular dialogue session, repeating these steps for
420 each statement that they have prepared for the dialogue meeting.¹⁷

421 4.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER

422 We will now consider how this activity was adapted for the race and gender
423 dialogue groups. This activity took place later in the semester after reading an
424 article on the metaphysics of race. Students were interested in weighing in on
425 the topic during the lecture, but time did not allow everyone to contribute to
426 the discussion. The students co-facilitating the dialogue group that followed the
427 lecture then decided that they would continue that conversation in the dialogue
428 group. The co-facilitators were most interested in whether race was partially
429 determined by group or individual beliefs. On its own, this question was a bit
430 too abstract to form into a single strong question. So, they decided to modify
431 the **Take a Stand Activity** described above.

432
433 The co-facilitators indicated to the group that they were going to offer a series
434 of cases where a society’s or individual’s view of a person seemed to have an
435 impact on their race. They then selected several students who volunteered to
436 offer their judgments about these cases and those students came to the front of
437 the class. They were then told that one wall was the ‘Strongly Agree’ wall, that
438 the other was the ‘Strongly Disagree’ wall, and that all other positions in the
439 room were a spectrum in between those two extremes. As in the **Take a Stand**
440 **Activity**, the facilitators then conducted a couple of practice rounds, reading
441 statements like “Papaya is delicious” so that participants were sure that they
442 understood the activity.

443
444 The facilitators, then, described a detailed scenario and asked the volunteers
445 to position themselves according to their level of agreement with the claim “In
446 this instance, society’s view about their race has an impact on what their race
447 actually is”, also giving students the opportunity to defend their position. After
448 their defense, the participants were permitted to reshuffle their positions if they
449 changed their minds. As the conversation progressed, the facilitators described
450 situations which, by their own estimation, became more and more difficult to
451 judge. This activity then served to motivate a discussion regarding the meta-
452 physics of race, including strong questions like “What specific characteristics of
453 race could be identified from the judgments of the group?” and “Did anyone
454 change their opinion about what race is based on the discussion?” Thus, not
455 only did the dialogue co-facilitators adapt the **Take a Stand Activity** for a

¹⁷Complete instructions for the **Take a Stand Activity** can be found in the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 27-28.

456 conversation about race, but they also planned a number of strong questions to
457 ask as well.

458 ELEMENT 5: ACTIVE LISTENING

459 5.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH

460 Beyond planning dialogue activities and asking strong questions, dialogue facil-
461 itators should also practice active listening. Active listening occurs when the
462 dialogue facilitator listens attentively to what dialogue participants are saying
463 and provides both verbal and non-verbal signals that they are listening closely.
464 Non-verbally, the facilitator might face the speaker, lean forward, or smile and
465 nod to demonstrate their interest in what the speaker has to say. The facilita-
466 tor might also ask clarifying questions or follow up with a summary to verify
467 what was said. All of these practices demonstrate that the facilitator is actively
468 listening, helping the group to stay focused on the dialogue conversation.¹⁸

469
470 Active listening aids the dialogue conversation in a number of different ways.
471 Active listening makes speakers feel heard and respected, communicating that
472 what they have to say is valuable and worth understanding. This example, then,
473 sets the tone for the group, modeling how participants should listen and interact
474 with one another. Active listening also builds trust within the group, both trust
475 in the facilitator and in the other dialogue group members. Seeing others listen
476 attentively to what they have to say will give speakers the confidence needed to
477 share more and to share at a greater depth. A final benefit of active listening is
478 that it moves the conversation forward. If there are any gaps in understanding,
479 asking clarifying questions or offering a summary of what the speaker said can
480 aid others in responding or adding to what the speaker has shared.

481 5.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER

482 In preparation to lead their dialogue groups, co-facilitators were trained in the
483 practice of active listening, both in listening attentively while dialogue partic-
484 ipants were speaking, and in asking follow-up questions to clarify and confirm
485 what was said. The co-facilitators, then, were in a good position to model active
486 listening and create an environment where all contributions were welcomed. As
487 discussed earlier, two of the most cited concerns about participating in con-
488 versations on race and gender were related to the way that dialogue members
489 would react to what was said. Some students were worried that they would be
490 interpreted uncharitably, while others were concerned that they would not be
491 taken seriously. Active listening plays a role in alleviating both of these con-
492 cerns. Beyond promoting deeper engagement, active listening makes it clear to
493 the speaker that what they are saying is being received charitably and reflec-

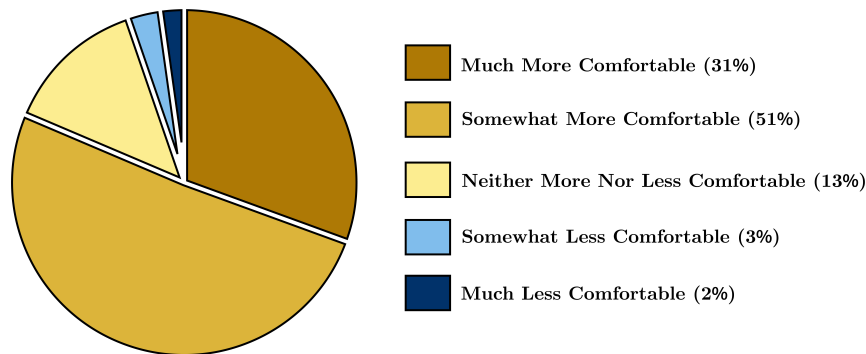
¹⁸For a full list of verbal and non-verbal practices that demonstrate active listening, see the PWOL Dialogue Training Manual (2021b), p. 11.

494 tively.

495

496 In our post-course survey, the majority of students reported feeling more com-
497 fortable discussing issues of race and gender. Due to the group norms and
498 the practice of active listening, 82% of dialogue participants said that they were
499 more comfortable sharing about these challenging topics, while only 5% reported
500 feeling less comfortable. Full student responses can be found in Figure 4:

After taking this class, are you more or less comfortable
discussing issues surrounding race, class, and gender with your classmates?



501

Figure 4: Student Comfort Levels

502 Not only did students feel more comfortable initiating conversations about race
503 and gender, but a number of students credited this newfound confidence to the
504 structure of their dialogue groups. Along with the above poll question, students
505 also responded to a short answer question explaining why this class had an
506 impact on their willingness to participate in these sorts of conversations. Here
507 is a sample of just some of those open-ended responses:

508 **In your own words, how would you say this class has impacted**
509 **your ability or willingness to discuss issues surrounding race,**
510 **class, and gender?**

511 • “I think the dialogue groups especially have made class discussion more
512 comfortable. I am not afraid to state my opinion [...] because of the norms
513 we have to go over. I feel like the class being emphasized as an open, safe
514 place for opinion has been very helpful.”

515 • “This class has introduced me to new philosophies and ways of thinking
516 about issues that I was already aware of, but didn’t quite know how to
517 talk about. I feel a lot more comfortable talking about it now because
518 of that new knowledge. Also, having practice discussing these issues is
519 something that has helped me, especially in the dialogue group.”

520 • “I talk about this class a lot with friends and my roommates; these aren’t
521 generally topics that I’d normally discuss. I do genuinely believe this class

522 has given me more confidence in being able to speak my mind, while also
523 listening to what others have to say as well.”

- 524 • “It has made me more comfortable with engaging in these difficult conver-
525 sations. I used to refrain from these conversations because I did not want
526 to accidentally offend anyone. I am not always good at articulating my
527 thoughts during these conversations, but this class, especially the dialogue
528 groups, have helped.”

529 With these responses, we can see that the dialogue group structure played a large
530 role in making students more comfortable sharing their views. The creation
531 of conversational norms and the consistent use of active listening reassured
532 students that the dialogue groups were a good place to practice understanding
533 their peers and explaining themselves, even with the challenging topics of race
534 and gender.

535 ELEMENT 6: PREVENTING AND RESOLVING CONFLICT

536 6.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH

537 By listening to and learning about the viewpoints of others, students will in-
538 evitably find outlooks that they disagree with, and because PWOL issues are
539 often of deep existential import, participants might not always know how to
540 approach their differences. This is where dialogue facilitators play an important
541 role in both preventing and resolving conflict.

542
543 When a primary or co-facilitator senses tensions rising within their dialogue
544 group, the first thing that they should do is remain calm. Disagreement is
545 unavoidable, and dialogue members will take their cues for how to react from
546 their facilitator. If the facilitator treats the conversation like any other, then
547 students know that they are allowed to explore potential disagreements. The
548 second thing that the facilitator should do is reiterate the goals of the dialogue
549 group. The group’s purpose is to learn about the perspectives and viewpoints
550 of others, not to convince anyone that one position is correct. Articulating that
551 it is okay to disagree will help students have less apprehension about potential
552 conflicts. In order to encourage a range of opinions, the dialogue leader should
553 then look to diversify the voices that are sharing about the question at hand.
554 Instead of allowing one or two people to dominate the conversation, the facili-
555 tator should call on a number of participants to have them weigh in on the topic.

556
557 Like we have already discussed with active listening, in the midst of diversi-
558 fying the conversation, the facilitator should ask clarifying questions to better
559 understand what speakers are saying. In some cases, students may believe that
560 they are disagreeing even though they may ultimately share the same common
561 ground. Asking further questions to determine whether the disagreement is genu-
562 ine or illusory is an important step for discovering where the conflict ultimately
563 lies. In the midst of disagreement, it may also be helpful to re-emphasize the

564 group norms. At no point in the conversation should participants be violating
565 the conversational norms, and pointing to those principles can be a good way to
566 remind students to be respectful of one another and follow the guidelines that
567 they have established. Lastly, facilitators should not feel the need to spend an
568 inordinate amount of time on themes that bring up disagreements. After they
569 have concluded their planned activity, they should feel free to move on to the
570 next discussion topic. This will reinforce that differences of opinion are normal,
571 not out of place, and should be expected in the course of the dialogue group.

572
573 Even though the above suggestions will resolve most potential conflicts, if ten-
574 sions linger after a particular dialogue session, it may help to briefly revisit the
575 topic at the next dialogue meeting. Referring to the previous session, the facil-
576 itator can ask if there is anything that anyone would like to clarify about what
577 they said at the previous meeting, or whether they had any thoughts that came
578 to mind after the conversation had concluded. Again, the dialogue facilitator
579 need not spend too much time on this, but giving participants a chance to clear
580 the air or clarify some misunderstandings may be helpful for the group moving
581 forward. Finally, if there are still issues that cannot be resolved within the di-
582 alogue group time, facilitators should have those involved in the conflict stick
583 around after the group to give them a chance to resolve their differences. Any
584 issues that remain should then be reported to the course instructor.

585 6.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER

586 Students come to conversations on race and gender with full awareness of the
587 potential for disagreement. Because of this challenge, we put even more empha-
588 sis on building a sense of community within the dialogue groups, moving slowly
589 into having more difficult conversations. We also emphasized a non-negotiable
590 norm for each group that we must exhibit respect for individuals and treat their
591 experiences as a significant datum of theorizing. We encouraged students to ask
592 clarifying questions, simultaneously helping to defend against possible misinter-
593 pretations (e.g., do you really mean X? Would you say its fair also to put the
594 point in terms of Y?) and to counteract the impression that the audience is not
595 interested in someone's perspective.

596
597 Another significant difference between a typical philosophy course and the class
598 we taught on race and gender is how invested students are in the topics we were
599 discussing. In many philosophy courses, students do not enter with a clear sense
600 of how that class might apply to their lives. They can be brought to see the
601 importance, say, of whether the correct understanding of the concept of hap-
602 piness is fundamentally hedonistic or not, but they do not typically come into
603 the course with an emotional attachment to one position or another. Disagree-
604 ments, then, are more apt to feel like opportunities to learn something new and
605 investigate novel concepts. Race and gender, however, are often thrust into the
606 political spotlight, and many students may feel that a substantial part of their
607 identity is bound up in particular views on these concepts, making abstract

608 arguments feel more like personal attacks. Giving a defense of an eliminativist
609 view of race, for example, may strike a student as potentially undermining a
610 substantial aspect of who they are. To make it clear to students that they and
611 their views were not under attack, we encouraged our facilitators to remind
612 the students that our aim is to reach a better understanding of ourselves and
613 those around us, a goal which can only be achieved with the risk of disagreement.

614
615 Our team of facilitators faced few major conflicts, but we will give an example
616 here of one of those few conflicts. In one of our group dialogues, students were
617 discussing what role, if any, race should play in how we understand ourselves
618 and our character. One student expressed incredulity that anyone would think
619 that being white or black was an essential part of who they are, and another
620 student heatedly retorted that they considered their race essential to their iden-
621 tity. Tense silence followed. One of the facilitators reminded the group of their
622 norms, including charitably construing their opponents. The facilitator then
623 asked the students to be more clear about what they meant by their terms
624 ‘race,’ ‘character,’ and ‘identity’. The following exchange was productive in a
625 variety of ways, but the most important insight was that the two students had
626 been using ‘race’ differently. The student who didn’t understand its importance
627 was thinking exclusively of the color of a person’s skin. The other student, how-
628 ever, was thinking more of something like ethnic background and all the cultural
629 and community connections that come with that. Even with this ambiguity re-
630 solved, they still did not agree, but by better understanding one another, they
631 came to regard the others position as much more reasonable.

632
633 Even though it was vital to get everyone talking and to let arguments play out
634 in a productive way, there remained a concern that such freedom might allow
635 students to express potentially problematic viewpoints. In order to allow dis-
636 agreements to run their course without letting harmful ideas be expressed with
637 impunity, we took a number of precautions. The first deterrent was the presence
638 of the trained primary dialogue facilitators, who were be able to redirect conver-
639 sations by referring to the shared norms and goals of the group. The norms and
640 group structure emphasize the mutual respect that participants need to show
641 one another, making them incompatible with talking about others in hurtful
642 ways. Another important deterrent was the content of the course. Many of the
643 course readings discouraged harmful ideas and presented arguments for where
644 such positions go wrong, giving students perspective on the shortcomings of a
645 number of problematic views. Ultimately, however, it was the dialogue structure
646 itself that had the largest impact. Over the course of the semester, dialogue par-
647 ticipants became more open and understanding towards one another, and these
648 other preventative measures were helpful in giving that process time to play out.

649

650 CONCLUSION

651 When it comes to the issues of race and gender, there is a particularly strong
 652 need for the development of communities which are committed to mutual un-
 653 derstanding. PWOL-style dialogue groups provide students who are new to
 654 philosophy the opportunity to create such a community, putting into practice
 655 the kinds of habits that will help them to live more philosophically. As can be
 656 seen in Figure 5, coming into the course, the majority of our students thought
 657 that it was important to be able to discuss issues related to race and gender:

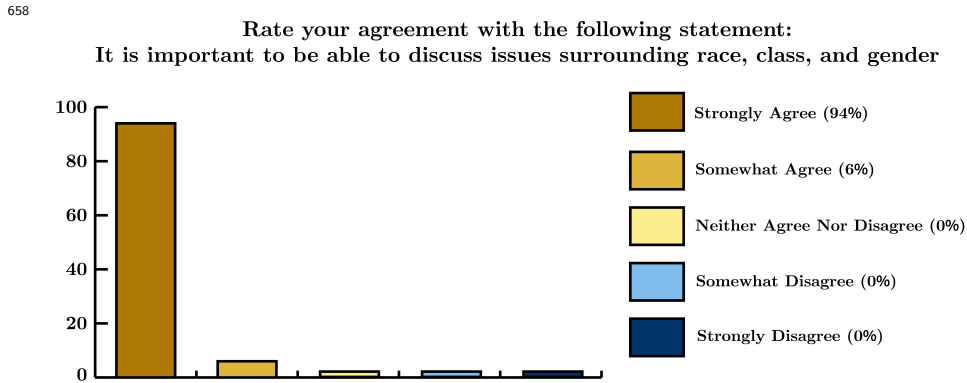
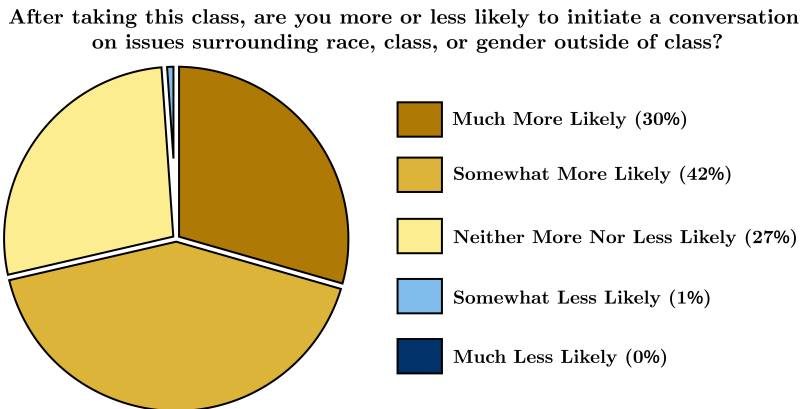


Figure 5: Importance of Intergroup Dialogue

659 The goal of our class, then, was to adapt the PWOL methodology to help
 660 students grow in their ability to discuss these challenging topics. As we have
 661 already seen, by the end of the course, students reported being more comfortable
 662 talking about race and gender. Perhaps because of this growth, the majority of
 663 students also said that they were more likely to initiate more conversations on
 664 race and gender moving forward. As detailed in Figure 6, a full 72% of students
 665 said that they were more likely to initiate more conversations on race and
 666 gender moving forward. As detailed in Figure 6, a full 72% of students
 667 said that, after taking our course, they were more likely to initiate conversations
 668 on race and gender, with only 1% of students reporting that they were less likely
 669 to start such conversations:



670

Figure 6: Willingness to Initiate

671 Not only did dialogue participants report a greater willingness to initiate these
 672 challenging conversations, but, by the end of the course, many students also
 673 reported being more willing to listen to those with differing perspectives. In
 674 their post-course survey, 73% of students said that they were now more willing
 675 to hear someone out who had a different view, while only 4% said that they
 676 were now less likely to listen to others. A full summary of responses can be seen
 677 in Figure 7:

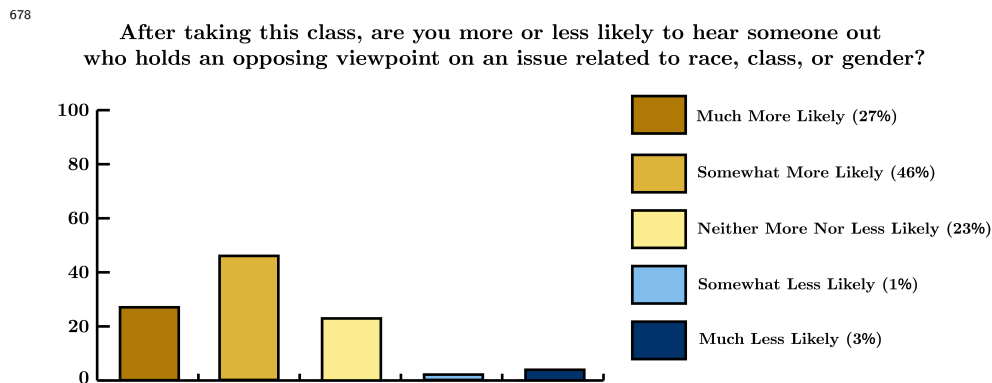


Figure 7: Willingness to Listen to Opposing Viewpoints

679 Promisingly, a number of students said that they were more willing to listen
 680 to others because of the ways that it deepened their own understanding. In
 682 addition to listening in order to be kind and respectful, students also felt that
 683 they were able to learn from those with whom they disagreed:
 684

685 **In your own words, how would you say this class has impacted**
 686 **your ability or willingness to discuss issues surrounding race,**
 687 **class, and gender?**

- 688 • “I think that, for a while, I have been pretty outspoken on my beliefs
 689 surrounding race, class, and gender, particularly in high school when I was
 690 president of the feminism club. What I struggled with most throughout
 691 this time was understanding other viewpoints and having the maturity
 692 to discuss them without being insulting or dismissive. After taking this
 693 class, my appreciation for other viewpoints does not come from a place
 694 of agreeing with them by any stretch; in fact, I feel even more strongly
 695 about my opinions. However, I am more intrigued by the possibility of
 696 other viewpoints – their validity, morality, basis, and most importantly,
 697 why they aren’t sound to me and the potential flaws they present in my
 698 own arguments. Overall, this class has encouraged me to think deeper
 699 about why people believe what they do and why opinions can differ so
 700 greatly.”

- 701 • “This class has allowed me to understand different viewpoints for many
702 arguments I had never previously considered. I am more equipped for
703 conversations with people who have opposing views.”
- 704 • “I think by hearing so many different opinions on topics I not only learned
705 more about other people’s perspectives, I was also able to adjust my own.
706 This class allowed me to see other people’s struggles and their reasoning
707 for thinking the way they do.”

708 The fact that students began to recognize the value of listening to the perspec-
709 tives of others offers perhaps the most promising reason to think that they will
710 continue to be active listeners moving forward. In their dialogue groups, stu-
711 dents began to engage with other viewpoints, not just for the sake of defending
712 their own, but also to see what they might have to learn from their ideological
713 opponents. These attempts then helped students to see the value of listening
714 to others, a habit that the majority of our students said that they planned to
715 adopt moving forward.

716
717 PWOL-style dialogue groups were clearly instrumental in helping our students
718 live more philosophically. The groups helped our students put into action their
719 desire to have more conversations about race and gender, building a philosoph-
720 ical community where they were comfortable developing their own views and
721 listening to the views of others. Encouragingly, we have received word that
722 some of these groups continued to meet after the close of the course, a hopeful
723 sign that the methods of PWOL are certainly at home in discussions of race
724 and gender. We agree with Hadot that philosophical discourse is at the heart of
725 living philosophically, and we hope that the implementation of PWOL dialogues
726 that we have provided here can help others invite their students to join them in
727 living out philosophy as a way of life.

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