Creating a Virtual Symposium:
The Benefits of Using a Democratic Syllabus

DANA TRUSSO
LaGuardia Community College

Abstract: Democratizing the syllabus has been discussed in the fields of sociology and political science but rarely in philosophy. In this paper I will draw upon my experience of teaching Philosophy of Love in an online modality to examine the impact on motivation when students fill in the gaps presented in a democratic syllabus.

Key words: democratic syllabus, online learning, motivation, philosophy of love, Plato

Democratizing Philosophy of Love

Philosophy of Love is an upper-level course offered once every academic year. The course is offered at a community college in a uniquely situated Philosophy program as part of the largest urban public university system in the United States. With ten full-time faculty with various areas of specialization, the Philosophy program runs approximately fifty sections of eleven different courses every semester. New York City, where we live, was the epicenter of the pandemic, and in those early days over 200,000 people tested positive, deaths almost reaching 20,000 before June of that year, with the highest cases concentrated in communities of color and areas of high poverty, which our college serves.[1] In March 2020, the second week of the spring semester, the college transitioned to remote learning with most courses offered in an online teaching modality. Faculty could decide whether to offer online courses asynchronously or synchronously, and if synchronously whether the class would meet virtually once or twice a week. Philosophy of Love met once a week virtually during the Spring 2021 semester.

As many educators experienced during the pandemic, there was little time to prepare for the shift to remote learning. I came into online learning with a great deal of skepticism, particularly about student

motivation and engagement. Philosophy courses are fortunate in that they do not require specialized equipment, but we do need an *agora*—a way to discuss together. I was uncertain if I should teach Philosophy of Love online in Spring 2021 for two reasons. First, I was unsure the online modality would work for this course. For Philosophy of Love, I would need to start from scratch; there was no preexisting online component for this upper-level seminar like I had for the other course I teach. In a usual semester of Philosophy of Love, the class would meet twice a week sitting in a semi-circle to examine the difference between competing definitions of love as eros, philia, and agape with the aid of classical and contemporary philosophical texts, love letters, poetry, and film. By the end of the course, students were able to meet the course objectives by interpreting and analyzing challenging texts, presenting their own interpretations of the texts to the class, justifying their positions with arguments, connecting various philosophical traditions, writing reflection papers, applying class discussion to cultural events, and answering philosophical questions regarding the nature, aim and activity of love.

The course did not seem likely to succeed in an online modality if students were unwilling to discuss the material with one another. Could a remote class meet the learning objectives? How could I translate an in-person course to an online modality? Did the content of the course lend itself to online instruction? Would students participate? If students did not participate and the course content was communicated as a series of lectures, I feared it would be difficult for students to practice critically evaluating the nature of love. If students were not motivated to engage in independent research, would the class devolve into a lecture series where students were frustrated by the focus on competing arguments and looked to the instructor instead as an expert on healthy relationships and dating? But I am no Dr. Ruth.

The physical space of the classroom, including a large whiteboard, allowed us to trace key concepts together, mapping connections between ideas like Plato's theory of forms and recollection. Sitting in a semi-circle set the tone for the seminar approach of the course. Calling on each student to contribute a response that was written on the board reinforced that each person's perspective was important, building a sense of trust and mutual respect. How could one set the tone in an online modality? How could one build the foundation of ideas along with the trust necessary to build a classroom community where students are expected to work independently and collaboratively? Unable to mandate the use of cameras, how could one create a "beautiful" environment for silent blank squares that would be conducive to dialectical exchange?

The second doubt that arose was wondering whether a philosophical examination of love was the best content to offer during a global crisis. Will students be able to move from the highly personal to critical evaluation of diverse concepts of love? Richard White points out that when teaching Philosophy of Love, "students are usually willing and often eager to relate their own personal experiences of love, and this makes it difficult to maintain a proper balance between the discussion of lived examples and the more philosophical examination of love that should proceed from this level" (White 2002). In a time of crisis, students may expect the course to be more therapeutic than dialectical, creating an imbalance of personal processing of pandemic experiences (certainly necessary during this time), but neglecting the more transformative experience of learning to love wisdom. Faced with a global pandemic, an overhaul of education through remote learning, rising awareness of the economic, gender, and racial inequities in society, on top of the erosion of democratic ideals as seen on January 6, how could those democratic principles promote learning in an online class?

Democracy is an experiment that in some ways defies definition as it evolves. Generally, it implies a form of government where people have the power to choose their leaders, and elected leaders are responsible for representing the will and interests of the people. Democracy rests upon the principle that all people should be equally valued and as such all people, both those in the majority and minority, should have equal access to opportunities and protection from abuses of power like bias, corruption, and intolerance. According to democratic principles, every citizen is worthy of participation in governance, and to ensure democracy's survival, should participate in civic duties including learning about local and global issues, listening to opposing viewpoints, debating, voting, protesting, and dissenting, along with promoting community dialogue, recognizing the power of shared governance, and resisting the pessimism of futility, among other activities involving critical thinking. Active, individual participation in dialogue with the community is essential for deepening democracy–an ongoing process much like the dialectical method. However, there is a "deep gap between the promise of a radical democracy and the existing reality" (Giroux 2020, p. 84). It is from recognizing the gaps that critical consciousness can grow. Societal mechanisms that support the development of such a critical consciousness protect rights such as freedoms of speech, religion, press, and peaceful assembly, along with laws that ensure those rights are protected. Alongside the protection of rights bolstered by laws, society must also provide free and fair elections, checks and balances, and access to public education. Democracy empowers citizens to participate in solving current problems, so what can we do as educators to encourage civil discourse?

Democracy cannot flourish without equal access to education. Critical pedagogy arms the individual, motivated by hope for liberatory change, with the critical consciousness necessary to resist and dismantle oppressive structures (Freire 1970). The skepticism of teaching in an online modality led me to research alternative strategies to generate self-motivation in students. I discovered the idea of democratizing a course and considered if restructuring the course using a democratic syllabus would help resolve the concerns I had. Democratizing the syllabus applies the principles of democracy to developing course curriculum. This process promotes the learner's motivation by providing opportunities for agency and metacognition—agency in the sense of being actively engaged in the learning process and metacognition in the sense of evaluating one's thought processes. A syllabus designates course content. Minimally a syllabus will contain instructor information, a course description, required texts and materials, and a schedule with reading and assignment deadlines. Oftentimes, syllabi are supplemented with learning objectives, descriptions of assessment tools like assignments, tests, grading criteria, and college-wide and course-specific policies like attendance, late work, academic honesty, and helpful campus resources. While some aspects of the syllabus may remain fixed such as the college's policy on academic dishonesty, other parts such as required readings, assignments, and learning outcomes are more flexible and conducive to democratization. The range of democratization can be tailored to a course's learning objectives. Students may have input on course content directly (by choosing readings) or indirectly (by choosing questions, topics, or themes, assignments, or even learning objectives). A course with a "democratic syllabus" includes at least one aspect where students have agency to define the parameters of the course. For my purposes, I democratized the syllabus with a focus on course content.

Finding only one article addressing democratizing a philosophy syllabus that took a complicated approach setting up the class "conceived as an exercise in planning," I turned to other fields where the question of democratizing a course had been discussed more extensively (Whiteside 1980). The literature focused on how a democratic syllabus serves as an effective way to teach the principles of democracy (Hudd 2003; McWilliams 2015). In her political science course, McWilliams utilized "a 'democratic syllabus' in which students determined discussion topics, led class sessions, and submitted work of their own choosing," adding that the experiment "was a success in terms of the classroom dynamics that it engendered and the thinking about democratic politics and citizenship that it encouraged" (McWilliams 2015). One disadvantage she identified was that it was incredibly time-consuming, requiring two paid assistants, and four times the amount

of preparation (McWilliams 2015). This was not feasible for me, but as I will explain, adapting components of the democratic syllabus to fit the needs of my course ended up not being overly time-consuming.

Instead of allowing students to create their assignments, I opted for a "skeleton syllabus" (Hudd 2003) by giving them gaps to fill and options on how to communicate their final projects. Students chose content and led discussion but did not formulate the activities or rubrics for the course. Another approach starts with the syllabus as a blank slate and students come to a consensus on readings, assignments, and course structure (Wolk 1998; Bruffee 1999; Sartor and Young Brown 2005), but this did not quell my fears about student motivation in an online class, especially in a time when remote learning was the only option. Learning how to use new technology to learn in an online environment can be stressful, and I did not want to add to that stress by asking students to design the course from scratch.

In terms of time management, when reviewing the student selections there were some new readings and pop culture references that I had to confirm were relevant, but for most I was at least familiar with the material. Additionally, the method for examining the required readings—to tease out the nature, aim, and activity of love for each author—provided a foundation. Students did not feel lost in the vast array of sources because the method for reviewing the material was clear. Also, there was a shared online research folder with possible choices and examples of readings. Some students opted to use the college library's databases, while others took advantage of the research folder I provided. Each student tailored the course to their interests, and in a similar fashion I tailored the course to meet the needs of students.

Filling in the Gaps

To solve the two-fold problem of modality and course content, I democratized four elements of the syllabus. First, I asked students to fill in the gaps on the course schedule in a shared document (see Appendix A). This allowed students to edit the document directly.[2] Students were required to update the course schedule after consulting with me. I met individually with students to go over their ideas for their presentation topics, key questions or "puzzles," relevant forms of media or pop culture addressing the topic and required reading for the class. The link to the editable section of the syllabus (only the schedule) is displayed prominently on the learning management system. Students have quick access to the shared syllabus and are urged to type in their presentation topic, discussion questions, and add links to cultural examples of their topic like song or film. The syllabus contains examples including pop culture references, themes, and topics that I consider relevant, along

with readings drawn from a variety of sources including podcasts, open educational books (OER), videos, and journal articles available at the library. The examples I share with students illustrate topic flexibility (see Appendix B).

Promoting student agency by filling in the gaps of the syllabus confirms that each student is a valuable participant in the course. The democratic syllabus establishes inclusivity and student autonomy; understanding that each person is responsible for providing at least one course reading and moderating class discussion offered a space for activating metacognition concerning their individual research interests, and how those interests related to the previous questions discussed in class. Students were motivated to participate in class and encourage one another to engage in questioning and critically evaluating their notions of love that the readings brought to the foreground. For example, a student was interested in exploring the issue of socially constructed power structures in romantic partnerships. The questions presented to the class for discussion included: "If love is power, who has power over you? Can we love without desire for power? Can we control the power that we give to other people while loving? Is there a difference of power between the sexes? If so, who has more power and why?" They chose Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* for the required reading, and I suggested a reading from Mottier's *A Very Short Introduction to Sexuality*. I oversaw the sequence of presentations in a way that the topics built on one another. The next week, when a student presented on monogamy versus polyamory, the previous student was primed to engage the material and connected it to the previous week's discussion.

Second, the method for presenting the material for their student-led discussion was flexible; students could choose to incorporate videos, slides, poetry, class activities, etc., as they saw fit. The presenters moderated class discussion, fielding questions from students and posing follow-up questions relating to previous class sessions.

Third, peer review was undertaken in a "speed dating" format where students discussed who would serve as the best partner for critical review. Well-acquainted with everyone's interests, students participated in a speed-reviewing round to interview their top choices for peer review. Abstracts were submitted the day before our class meeting. Some students chose to work with people who had opposing perspectives, while others partnered with those who were more aligned with their viewpoints. In some cases, philosophy majors are paired with non-majors. Philosophy majors gain confidence as they engage in argumentation, while non-majors feel supported as they practice using these new tools. One of the crowning moments of the course was on the last day's class symposium where students talked about their final research projects, and the peer reviewers presented

their feedback to generate a class debate. Two quieter students paired together, both with similar research questions (What is true love?), and they both conclude that love is a universal concept and is not relative to personal experience. During the symposium, one wrote in the chat, "May I say something?" and we encouraged them to unmute. They provided a substantial refutation of the claim that only through agape one can experience eros, and the partner responded with clear, thoughtful reasons. The way these reticent students engaged in critical evaluation of each other's work via dialectic was one of the most important moments in the course.

Fourth, the method for communicating the final project was flexible; a rubric was provided, and students were given creative license with the usual option of a critical essay expanded to other formats like love letters, op-eds, podcasts, poetry, etc. The final projects were based on independent student research questions explored collaboratively throughout the semester through student-led discussions. Utilizing a democratic syllabus, contributors each chose their own topics and readings, presenting it to the class for discussion, revising and reworking throughout the semester with help from their peers and incorporating various readings from the course.

All in all, we challenged ourselves to pursue wisdom together, appreciating the differences in our ideas with open minds and hearts. The fruits of curiosity honed by a rigorous dialectical process are presented in a class journal. Students identified puzzles and aporias on the nature, aim, and activity of love, and were motivated to "solve" puzzles throughout the course. Through identifying their own interest and sharing during class discussion, and then editing the shared syllabus with their topic, readings, and popular culture or literary references, students became co-teachers in the course. For example, one student wrote a series of letters, while another organized an hour-long interview with me. Accepting alternative formats for the final projects can be risky, but in this case, honed through the dialectic, they were executed well. Research projects can be personally meaningful and philosophically rigorous.

Setting the Stage

Once the democratic element is introduced to the students on the first day of class, how does one begin to put it into action? How does one create a democratic environment? I suggest starting with using the philosophical method to critique conventional wisdom on love, transitioning to accessing the students' prior knowledge. The failed speeches of Plato's *Symposium* serve as an entry to critical analysis of conventional notions of love. When students enter the world of romance

of Classical Athens, they do not expect to encounter the lover-beloved relationship between established male aristocrats and their young apprentices; the educational relationship bound up with erotic desire is shocking. We start with the speeches on love from *Symposium* because it is easier to critique love from a vantage point. The distance between prior knowledge and the text begins to diminish when current notions of romance like soulmates or marriage as "happily ever after" are compared to the flawed reasoning in the speeches. Each symposiast giving a speech on eros in Plato's *Symposium* draw upon prior experience of love (based on their position within the lover-beloved relationship), and each flaw or contradiction is raised again in Socrates' speech in a way that challenges the original intent. For example, Agathon defines eros as possessing beauty, while Socrates rejects this in favor of the claim that eros desires beauty precisely because it lacks beauty. This sets up the ladder of love, which describes the activity of love as ascending from particular beautiful people to the idea of beauty itself.

As a specialist in Plato's erotic philosophy, the first two weeks include lectures dedicated to Plato's *Symposium*. The following week was the first "class symposium," where the chapter "Puzzles" from de Sousa's *Love: A Very Short Introduction* serves as a platform for students to ask questions about the nature of love. Giroux states that the instructor should create an environment cultivating the "skills, knowledge, and authority [students] need to inquire and act upon what it means to live in a substantive democracy, to recognize anti-democratic forms of power, and to fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial, and gender inequalities" (2020, p. 83). One method to aid the development of critical consciousness is to access the prior knowledge of students, connecting it to cultural influences, and then applying gentle pressure. Accessing what students already believe about love and asking students to tease out the logical consequences of such beliefs increases student motivation to both jump into the debate and continue to ask questions challenging conventional interpretations of love. The critical analysis of love provides a space for students to question societal structures that impose meaning and value. Formalizing the inclusion of pop culture references through media selection is a way to access the prior knowledge of the learner in a way that does not intimidate or alienate them. It shifts the critique from the person to the ideas. Challenging conventional notions of love and romance that dominate society and popular culture exposes problematic interpretations of love, and when students begin to see this in conversation with one another it builds their confidence and motivation to contribute to the class.

When prior knowledge is activated, the learner connects their lived experience to the course content, furthering their examination of love.

According to Dewey, "all genuine education comes about through experience" (1938, p. 13). Although individuals have disparate experiences with love, there are prevailing notions that shape how we understand those experiences. It should not be presumed that students will reflect on the prior knowledge they are drawing upon to question and examine the ways they view love (Knowles 1998, Ambrose 2010). Rather, prior knowledge should be activated to help build a new conceptual framework that simultaneously contains an awareness of previous experiences and beliefs and critical consciousness of said beliefs, especially when they reflect conventional values and norms. Democratizing the content of the course reinforces the connection between the student's prior knowledge and assumptions on love–and the importance of challenging those norms–without imposing a monolithic way of correctly understanding love derived from an established canon. As Dewey said, the "imposition from above is opposed [to] expression and cultivation of individuality" (1938, p.5) and alienates the student from the transformative experience learning affords. Adding a democratic element emphasizes that education is a social process that promotes living a meaningful life (Dewey 1938).

Connecting those questions to the speeches in Plato's *Symposium* motivated students to turn their interest into a research question. For example, students asked questions like, what is real love? Is love universal, or is love a particular experience? Is love free or determined? Is it liberating or limiting? Is love good or bad? Is hate the shadow side of love? By the end of our class symposium dedicated to love's "puzzles," students discover their research interests and are excited to delve more deeply into the puzzles. Interestingly, by the end of the semester the class concluded that one cannot divorce the good and bad experiences brought about by the act of loving. Processing negative experiences often leads to a transformation of the self that is part of living the good life, the examined life. The class chose the key questions to focus on during our semester together and worked together to elicit new ways of approaching the problems they identified.

If there were one theme for the Spring 2021 semester, it would be the "shadow side of love"—exploring divine madness alongside transformative ascent. For example, one student was fascinated by the idea of self-dissolution, while another was interested in a related concept, *anatman* or the doctrine of no-self in Buddhist philosophy. The latter student asked if romantic love is a desire one is attached to thus causing suffering, or a practice that could lead to enlightenment? The former responded with more questions on the nature of erotic love: If love is good, why does it cause so much pain? Can pain lead to pleasure? What does it mean to not have a self, or to lose a sense of self in a

romantic partnership? Debating these questions in class helped both students construct strong final research projects.

Climbing the Ladder of Love

Democratizing the syllabus involves infusing the course with the instructor's scholarship that serves as a model for the philosophical novice. My expertise centers on Plato's theory of love, so the course is an opportunity to put my scholarly interests into action. Sometime the students who enroll in Philosophy of Love desire to learn from an expert how to better *practice* romantic love. The desire to possess knowledge on eros to live a happy life motivated them to enroll in the course in the same way it would motivate them to watch a TED Talk—the desire to possess knowledge on healthy love or "true love." Pithy sayings provide the illusion of transformation rather than doing the work of thinking about those pithy sayings and what assumptions they rely on. Thus, philosophy is truly a labor of love. Philosophy channels desire to learn how to better examine cultural attitudes and definitions of love through engaging in dialectical reasoning. The wide-open gap of the democratic syllabus visually illustrates that knowledge would not be spooned out in delicious bite-size lectures. Rather, in conversation together we perform the hard work of love.

Teaching a course on the Philosophy of Love is an opportunity to embrace the Delphic oracle's injunction to "know thyself" by engaging in the Socratic method. Constructing the syllabus together is an activity performing Plato's theory of love, which shows a way to stimulate self-motivation towards a love of wisdom in the novice. Providing a space where each student can explore an aspect of love that is meaningful to them illustrates that their interest is significant, their interest could translate into academic research questions, and that listening and responding to their peer's feedback is a way to learn more about the gaps in their own understanding. When a community of inquiry among equals emerges, so does philia. Eros transforms to philia, which in turn fuels a burning desire for wisdom—Plato's philosophical eros. In other words, the student's attraction to one particular burning question, perhaps obsessively so, serves as the first rung of the ladder of love. Encountering other student questions opens the door to an attraction to many more perspectives, and expands the purview of each student, moving the class to the second rung of the ladder. Ideally, students make interdisciplinary connections as the topics of questions expand from love to any form of knowledge, the third and fourth rungs on the ladder. The last rung of the ladder, reaching Beauty itself, represents the movement from passive to active learners as students recognize the difference between experiences and universal concepts that illuminate

those experiences; discussions no longer mimic dialectical reason, but participate in it and prepare one for further discussions with the demos of the agora. Students become philosophers—lovers of wisdom; as Plato would say, the soul becomes virtuous not by reflecting Beauty itself, but by participating in beautiful dialectics.

Implementing a democratic syllabus is a successful tool in an online modality because the process shifts the perspective of what education is by reversing the conventional roles of teacher (active) and student (passive). From the very beginning students understand that they will need to reflect deeply about why they chose the course. They also understand that they will need to transform that initial interest into an academic research project fueled by their desire to critically evaluate their own preconceived notions of love in exchange with other students. Understanding that we all arrive in the class with preconceived notions about love, shaped by our experiences and cultural backdrop, inclusive discussion brings these notions to the attention of the class, each serving as a puzzle that we aim to explore. Evaluating the relationship between ideas and our lived experience, questions conjure new conceptual frameworks for understanding love. In Plato's *Symposium* Diotima characterizes love as the activity of "giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul," and the definition itself creates an opportunity to ask questions. Is giving birth beautiful? Are gaps attractive? The process of birthing through gaps may make one uncomfortable, sometimes profoundly so, much like philosophy. Philosophy and philosophers play the role of the midwife who aids in the birth of beautiful ideas—a messy, painful, frustrating, and ultimately transformative process. As instructors we create an environment designed to help give birth to ideas. Learning is necessary because humans are "in between wisdom and ignorance."[3] Humans are not all-knowing, but humans are not completely ignorant either. The fact that we desire wisdom reveals both lack of wisdom and at least knowledge of that lack wisdom. It's all about the gaps.

Socrates explains that if you don't think you need anything, of course you won't want what you think you don't need" (Plato 200a7–9). One aspect of the human condition is searching for answers we lack, and philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is a vehicle toward truth. Gaps push us as we long to fill in the missing pieces. The greatest lack in life is wisdom, and the greatest fulfillment in life is bridging the gap between ignorance and wisdom. Philosophical eros means that one loves something enough to think deeply about it and not simply to possess it. We long to fill in the gaps, but it is important to stay a while in the discomfort of the gaps and listen to what it tells you. Socrates' interlocutors must move themselves up the Ladder of Love from their

own philosophical eros; wisdom is not attained by merely being pushed all the way by another up the Ladder of Love.

Careful course design, reflecting how the method of teaching responds to the content, is likened to Diotima relaying the mysteries of the Ladder of Love to Socrates; her crafted speech (crafted by Socrates in the dialogue, which was crafted by Plato) demonstrates the multi-layered nature of education and need for recollection and consequent reconfiguration. In the democratic classroom, the instructor models how the philosophical examination of ideas, in conversation with others in their respective field, motivates the development of research questions that further the conversation and constructing new ways of understanding. My specialization in Plato's theory of love informs both the content of my courses and the pedagogical methods. For example, I use the Ladder of Love as a model of education, moving from particular experiences to universal ideas. Diotima uses the ladder of love to teach the young Socrates that knowledge of the world is incrementally learned and intimately linked to desire. From our attraction to one beautiful body, we learn of the beauty of many bodies, which in turn inspires a love for politics and ultimately philosophy itself.

We learn about the Ladder of Love, and then ourselves engage in a gradual process of critiquing common conceptions or *endoxa* concerning love and moving to more abstract evaluations of love. Content informs form; form informs content. The same is true for any content. How the democratizing gaps are presented will be determined by the instructor's course objectives and modality. For example, if the class meets twice a week, student-led presentations could be scheduled on the first day of the week, with the second day devoted to instructor facilitated discussions on a reading connected to the student's topic. If the course is general, like Introduction to Philosophy or Critical Thinking, the instructor can help connect students to readings that relate to the students' majors, career aspirations, or personal interests. Possibilities abound. The point is to start a conversation with students by asking them what they are interested in, what questions are meaningful to them, and what they expect to take away from their time in a philosophical learning environment.

Takeaways

"I don't think I can do this." Mid-pandemic uncertainty motivated this instructor to re-think her approach to teaching Philosophy of Love. The course objectives of examining the nature, aim, and activity of eros, philia, and agape in the history of philosophy seemed impossible to recreate in an online environment, and too distant from the trauma of the pandemic, racial inequity, and an undermining of democracy

exacerbated by identity politics on top of the climate crisis. I was hesitant to teach Philosophy of Love as an online course. The first few weeks serve as a crash course to philosophy in general, with a strong emphasis on ancient Greek philosophy, ensuring every student enrolled would start with a similar framework regardless of major or academic background. The lectures were philosophically dense, intellectually energetic, with fast-paced activities involving student feedback to questions like, "What is love? What are different objects of love?"

What I learned is that students hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic were eager to join a community of thinkers, listen to diverse opinions, learn, encourage each other, and share their experiences grappling with the concept of love in the shadow of the collective grief and loss experienced in small, crowded apartments to the sound of sirens racing down sullen streets, once so full of life. A democratic syllabus was introduced during the first class meeting, and the mode of communication for the final project was made more flexible to include creative works and videos.

Students began to feel comfortable sharing their unique interests in love. Students shared what prior knowledge or experience of love motivated their desire to learn more, question deeply, and exchange ideas—from an obsession with the Backstreet Boys to questions of identity and addiction; from heartbreak conjuring images of death and heated love leading to self-dissolution to critiquing socially constructed power dynamics in gender, sexuality, and monogamy; a curiosity about the science of love and how the heart relates to the brain, to grappling with a love of the divine and the road to enlightenment. Instead of trying to fit these unique interests into topics that emerge from the history of philosophy, each interest was crafted into a topic that connected to various philosophical interpretations. I used my expertise in the philosophical examination of love to help connect the students' ideas to theories that would further their reflection, urging them to continue moving forward to create new ideas that make life meaningful. Like Plotinus said, "this is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight" (Plotinus *Enneads* 4). I was happy to play Diotima to the young Socrates within each student. I would be remiss if I did not mention that my own understanding of love was pushed further during the pandemic and throughout the semester; my world expanded, rising to Beauty itself just in time to hear the summer roar of cicadas.

What was the experience of taking Philosophy of Love as a virtual symposium during a pandemic? "I'm so happy I could die." This pre-pandemic exclamation puzzled one philosophy major to center their paper on the role of self-dissolution in love. In general, students learned that despite personal hardships and societal distress, learning

towards wisdom by developing a critical consciousness is possible. As one student said, "we climbed the Ladder of Love together." The student, co-editor of the journal, wrote in her introduction that, "You see, this class was nothing like I have ever experienced. Instead of the professor lecturing to us, we lectured to each other. Although we were on Zoom, on video, it really felt like we were all sitting in a circle, sharing, and listening. In doing so, we took the general idea of Love, the picture society paints it in, and dug deeper than we have ever gone before. Analyzing what it means and why it's different for everyone. We turned off the blinding spotlight Love was in, and we were able to see it more clearly, with more depth. . . . What we essentially created is real and personal definitions of love in all its positive and negative forms."

After the semester ended, a survey was sent to the students, requesting responses to four questions: What was taking Philosophy of Love like for you? What was using a democratic syllabus like for you? What were the challenges of a democratic syllabus? What did you get out of the class? One student shared their experience taking this course in a virtual environment and responded that "it's been an enormous pleasure and very rewarding. The idea to talk about love over a screen seems an absurd endeavor but especially throughout this past year I welcomed any form of love and every week I was looking forward to our next class, so thank you very much! Now, I can't resist the temptation asking you about the differences between teaching this class in a classroom and virtually? On the bright side of having this setting remains the option that whenever somebody felt uncomfortable, they could turn off their camera and regroup in private at their safe home."

A second student mentioned that "I think in many ways, having the class online was beneficial because the Zoom call format really reinforced the feeling of talking to each other face to face which you wouldn't find normally in in-person classes. To further this point, it made it feel that every time someone spoke, it was as if that person was giving a 'mini-presentation.' Taking it during this time worked well [because of the] opportunities for introspection that it provides."

When asked generally about the democratic syllabus, students said it was, "a liberating approach that made me feel both exploring and accepted as a voice in a class. All of this while learning from every participant in this course." Another student said that they "learned so much. I was anticipating each class instead of dreading it. I was excited to share and participate and lecture to the class (this coming from a very shy person who has trouble with public speaking)." When it came to bringing students into the process of choosing content for the course, one student explained that "the democratic syllabus was a very engaging model. Oftentimes I wish in other classes I had the

opportunity to present a branch of the topic that I was personally passionate about and having the opportunity here was a blessing honestly."

The challenges of the democratic approach were that students wanted more time. "My only disappointment was that I had to share lecture time with someone else and make it seem almost like a team project. That made my lecture shorter and I felt I had so much to say." Another explained that timing was a challenge because "as someone who presented early in the list, I was not able to draw as much from the topics of my peers as they were able to if they presented later on. So there was less inspiration for certain discussion topics in my presentation since there was hardly anyone prior to me." The same student also reflected that "Doubtlessly the best and most engaging class I've taken. It is actually unfortunate that I probably won't get to have a class like this again in the future."

One aspect of democratizing the syllabus that did not work well in this experiment concerned the format of the final project. One student consulted with me about using the alternate format of love letters and the project was successful in meeting the requirements of the assignment, and another conducted a one-hour interview with me; while one student used slides which drew mostly from prior knowledge and lacked critical engagement with the course material and discussions. Although we dedicated time to constructing thought-provoking questions, critiquing norms of romance, researching relevant texts, there was not much student interaction during the discussions on the *format* of the project. I did not devote ample time to brainstorming what it means to be a public intellectual participating in cultural conversations. Democratizing the assignment instructions or modality with proper justification could be beneficial, but it was not in my case.

I strongly encourage democratizing the content of the course (topics, guide questions, readings) to student selection, but caution flexibility on the design of the assignments without dedicating ample time to discussion that provides justification for alternative methods of engagement tailored to the individual's goals. I could not sacrifice the time because we were meeting once a week online. I could certainly foresee a scenario where assignment development was incorporated into a class successfully. For example, depending on the student's aim in the course, she could justify the format of her final project providing she has a good reason to communicate in her preferred modality, strengthening metacognition. She could submit a manuscript draft for publication in a journal, conference presentation, poster presentation, lesson plan, book review, book proposal, or a piece for a public forum like a podcast, blog, interview, journalistic op-ed, or an experiential activity like organizing an event like a panel discussion, protest, or philosophy club meeting. For some of the above assignments, a reflec-

tion on the experience would increase engagement with course material and metacognition without sacrificing agency.

Approaching the course through a democratic syllabus shifts the expectation of learning from one where the faculty lectures the students to one where the students are expected to both learn from one another and to teach one another. Moderating class discussion and providing readings that the other students are required to read and discuss during class build confidence, motivation, and metacognition. The democratic syllabus is a valuable tool for teaching in an online modality because it generates motivation to select topics that are meaningful and culturally relevant, to lead class discussion, and to work collaboratively on independent research projects. This sets the tone for inclusive discussions where students take ownership of their time together participating in an active learning environment, even when that environment is a virtual symposium. The added benefit of relatively easy modification confirms that it is worth the time to learn more about how democratizing the syllabus can serve as an essential tool for your pedagogical toolkit. Filling in the gaps is one step towards learning and loving towards wisdom.

Appendices

Appendix A: Completed Democratic Syllabus for Philosophy of Love Spring 2021

Week 1	Introduction to Philosophy of Love; Democratic Course Schedule	Instructor
Week 2	Soul Mates—Tragedy or Comedy? Media: The Origin of Love *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* Reading: Plato *Symposium* (audiobook, 2.5 hours), Aristophanes's Speech (pp.19–24)	Instructor
Week 3	Philosophical Erotics Media: Allegory of the Cave short film (10 minutes) Reading: Plato *Symposium*, Agathon and Socrates, Socrates's Speech, Alcibiades's Speech (pp. 25–60)	Instructor
Week 4	SPRING BREAK	
Week 5	Love's puzzles (aporia!) Puzzles: Bring your questions and interests inspired by our discussions of Plato's *Symposium* Reading: *Love: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapter 1 "Puzzles," by Ronald de Sousa	Class Symposium

Week 6	Buddhist Perspectives on Love	Student 1
	Puzzle: What does Buddhism mean by 'desire is the root of all suffering'? What is the role of desire in love?	Supplements: World Tribune; Nichiren Buddhism for Daily Life
	Media: A Community of Love: an interview with philosopher of feminism and race bell hooks and Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh; Interview with Tina Turner	
	Reading: Thich Nhat Hanh *True Love*, selections;	
	Love: A Very Short Introduction to Love, Chapter 3 "Desire," by Ronald de Sousa	
Week 7	Love and Self-Dissolution	Student 2
	Puzzles: To what extent are we present or existing in instances of love? To what extent are we willing to sacrifice ourselves, or parts of ourselves, for love?	Supplement: *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, by Scott Atran. chap. 5, sect. 7 (PDF)
	Media: "Between the Shadow and the Soul," sonnet, by Pablo Neruda; "You are my Sun, my Moon, and all my Stars," poem, by E. E. Cummings; "I Am Stretched On Your Grave," poem, by Anonymous	
	Reading: "Love, Identification, and the Emotions," by Bennett W. Helm	
Week 8	Love of God and the Reality of Human Love	Student 3
	Puzzles: Can love be only one reality with different dimensions? How does God love us? How can we love God?	
	Media: https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=ptWlIbBqHCo (love is merciful, forgiving), Hildegard von Bingen Canticles of Ecstasy	
	Reading: Introduction and Part 1 of *Deus Caritas Est*, by Pope Benedict XVI (2005) (Christian); *New Yorker*, "How Augustine Invented Sex"	
Week 9	Love and Power	Student 4
	Puzzles: 1. If love is power, who has power over you?; 2. Can we love without desire for power?; 3. Can we control the power that we give to other people while loving?; 4. Is there a difference of power between the sexes? If so, who has more power and why?	Supplement on Beauvoir's existentialism: https:// www.youtube.com/ watch?v=Ws2Y2c Wme8c
	Media: Janelle Monáe *Screwed*; Foucault on Selfies	
	Reading: *Very Short Introduction to Sexuality*, chap. 1; selections from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*; *History of Love* (short video)	

Week 10	Companionship and Sexuality—Monogamy, Polygamy, Polyamory, etc.	Students 5 and 6
	Puzzles: What factors or qualities are involved in polyamory? What does it mean to be in a polyamorous relationship?	Supplements: "Why Happy People Cheat" (Atlantic); "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person" (*New York Times*)
	Media: "Is an Open Marriage a Happy Marriage?" (*New York Times*)	
	Reading: *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners*, by Deborah Anapol, chap. 1; *Notions of Love in Polyamory*, by Christian Kleese, selections	
Week 11	Falling in Love	Students 7 and 8
	Puzzles: Do you agree with the "birth of love" explained by Stendhal? What are your thoughts or ideas about falling in love? (Stendhal); Throughout the poem the speaker makes it clear his feelings for Annabel Lee. Do you think it was love or obsession towards her? (Edgar Allan Poe)	"Preparing Your Love Project" handout due
	"Love isn't simply about two people meeting and their inward-looking relationship: it is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two."	
	According to this quotation, love isn't just a relationship between two people. What is your interpretation of this quote and why do you believe in your thought?	
	Media: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44885/annabel-lee	
	Reading: Stendhal's crystallization; "Alain Badiou on How We Fall in Love and How We Stay in Love"	
Week 12	Love and Identity	Students 9 and 10
	Puzzles: How does love shape identity?	Abstract Due
	Media: The love pill; Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski on Love; Gray Matters; History of Marriage	Speed Reviewing, Round 1
	Reading: "On love," Alain de Botton; Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," and blog by Saachi Saraogi	
Week 13	The Shadow Side of Love	Students 11 and 12
	Puzzles: At what point does love cross over to the dark side? Where is the line? What causes shadow love? Can darkness illuminate?	Speed Reviewing, Round 2
	Media: An Unhealthy Obsession—The Blake Robinson Synthetic Orchestra Original	
	Reading: Jessica Reidy's "Madness Is Remembering"; 9 Signs of Codependency	
Week 14	Final Project Due (present to class)	Class Symposium
	Submit Project to Online Journal (in-class)	
	Peer Review due (present to class)	

Appendix B: Examples Provided to Students to Help Fill in the Syllabus Gaps

Media: *Golden Girls*; *Seinfeld* (television) Topic: Friendship Love Reading: Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*
Media: Janelle Monáe, "Screwed" (music) Topic: Sex and Power Reading: Foucault, *History of Sexuality*
Media: George Harrison, "My Sweet Lord" (music) Topic: The Divine and Agape Reading: *Agape and Eros*, by Nygren (1953); *An Experiment in Love* and *The Strength to Love*, by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1958); *Deus Caritas Est,* by Pope Benedict XVI (2005)
Media: *Selma* (film) Topic: Love as Social Activism Reading: Martin Luther King, Jr., "Civil Disobedience and Love"
Media: Radiolab, "This Is Your Brain on Love" (podcast, 25 minutes) Topic: Love and the Body Reading: Schopenhauer; Matt Ridley, *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (audiobook, 13 hours)
Media: "Montero" ("Call Me by Your Name"), by Lil Nas X; "Swerve," by Arizona Zervas (music) Topic: Lucretius on pleasure, death, and freedom Reading: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Love* (audiobook, 20 minutes); "Lucretius' Cure for Love in the *De Rerum Natura*," by William Fitzgerald

Notes

1. Thompson, Baumgartner, Pichardo, et al., "COVID-19 Outbreak."

2. Our college's mission statement is "to educate and graduate one of the most diverse student populations in the country to become critical thinkers and socially responsible citizens who help to shape a rapidly evolving society."

3. Google Drive is my preferred service to share documents and folders, although the format would work with any cloud service or file storage application that has a share setting for an editable document.

Bibliography

Ambrose, Susan A., Marsha Lovett, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, and Marie K. Norman. 2010. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Blinne, Kristen C. 2013. "Start with the Syllabus: HELPing Learners Learn Through Class Content Collaboration," *College Teaching* 61(2): 41–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2012.708679

Brookfield, Stephen D., and Stephen Preskill. 2005. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. 1999. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dewey, John. 1938. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Flierl, Michael, and Russ Hamer. 2019. "Designing Student Reflections to Enable Transformative Learning Experiences," *Teaching Philosophy* 42(2): 87–106. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201952104

Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Freire, Paulo, Patrick Clarke, Donaldo Macedo, and Stanley Aronowitz. 2001. *Pedagogy of Freedom Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Gettings, Michael. 2013. "Student-Centered Discussions in Introductory Philosophy," *Teaching Philosophy* 36(4): 321–36. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil20131013

Giroux, Henry. 2020. *On Critical Pedagogy*, 2nd ed. New York: Bloomsbury.

Hernandez, Idolina. 2011. "Critical Thinking and Social Interaction in the Online Environment." *Inquiry: Critical Thinking across the Disciplines* 26(1): 55–61 https://doi.org/10.5840/inquiryctnews20112618

hooks, bell. 2017. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Hopkins, Neil. 2014. "The Democratic Curriculum: Concept and Practice." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48(3): 416–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12088

Hudd, Suzanne S. 2003. "Syllabus under Construction: Involving Students in the Creation of Class Assignments," *Teaching Sociology* 31(2): 195–202. https://doi.org/10.2307/3211308

Jenkins, Carrie. 2017. *What Love Is and What It Could Be*. New York: Basic Books.

Knowles, Malcolm S., Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson. 1998. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development,* 5th ed. Houston: Gulf Pub. Co.

McWilliams, Susan. 2015. "The Democratic Syllabus," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 48(1): 167–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43284728

Mottier, Véronique. 2008. *Sexuality: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pearl, Arthur, and Tony Knight. 1999. *The Democratic Classroom: Theory to Inform Practice*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.

Plato. 2006. *Plato on Love: Lysis, Symposium, Phaedrus, Alcibiades, with Selections from Republic and Laws*, ed. C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Plotinus. 1966. *Enneads*, trans. A. H Armstrong. London: Harvard University Press.

Reeve, C. D. C. 2016. "Plato on Friendship and Eros," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-friendship/.

Sackris, David. 2017. "Philosophy as a Conversation: Teaching Research Skills to Philosophy Students," *Teaching Philosophy* 40(2): 231–54, https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201771970

Sartor, Linda. 2004. *Consensus in the Classroom: Fostering a Lively Learning Community*. Mt. Shasta, CA: Psychosynthesis Press in Collaboration with Consensus Classroom.

Shor, I. 1996. *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Solomon, Robert, and Kathleen Higgins. 1991. *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Sousa, Ronald De. 2015. *Love: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, Corinne N., Jennifer Baumgartner, Carolina Pichardo, et al. 2020. "COVID-19 Outbreak—New York City, February 29–June 1, 2020," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69(46):1725–29. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6946a2

White, Richard. 2002. "Thinking about Love," *Teaching Philosophy* 25(2): 111–21. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil200225219

Whiteside, David E. 1980. "A Student-Planned Course for Introductory Philosophy." *Teaching Philosophy* 3(3): 283–99. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil1980335

Wolk, Steven, and Leigh Peake. 1998. *A Democratic Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dana Trusso is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy in the Humanities Department at LaGuardia Community College (CUNY) in Queens, New York. Her research centers on the intersection of love and learning in Plato. datrusso@lagcc.cuny.edu.