

<SECTION HEADING> **The Philosopher as Teacher**

<CT>**VIDEO FEEDBACK IN PHILOSOPHY**

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<ABS>**Abstract:** Marginal comments on student essays are a near-universal method of providing feedback in philosophy. Widespread as the practice is, however, it has well-known drawbacks. Commenting on students' work in the form of a video has the potential to improve the feedback experience for both instructors and students. The advantages of video feedback can be seen by examining it from both the professor's and the student's perspective. In discussing the professor's perspective, this article shares observations based on the author's experience delivering feedback through video. Turning to the student's view, it discusses qualitative feedback solicited from students that indicates a clear preference for video feedback over written marginalia. In particular, students describe video feedback as more informative, more personal, better at suggesting improvements on future assignments, enhancing the professor's ability to communicate through tone of voice and gesture and easier to understand compared to written feedback.

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Keywords: video feedback, teaching and learning, teaching philosophy.<MC>

<A>**Introduction**

Marginal comments on student essays are a near-universal method of providing feedback in philosophy and other disciplines in the humanities. Widespread as the practice is, however, it has some well-known drawbacks. For instructors, writing comments can be time consuming (Crook et al. 2012). For students, written feedback can lack substantive value, most obviously when it is delivered in handwriting too

illegible to read. Even when it is legible, a curt scrawled comment such as “awkward” or “explain” can itself require explanation. For this and other reasons, 30 percent of students have reported finding feedback so unclear that they require follow-up clarification, and an even higher percentage may find written feedback of little value in improving later performance (Weaver 2006, Chanock 2000, Nurmukhamedov and Kim 2010). Experienced instructors will have encountered students who take little notice of written comments on their work and skip immediately to their mark. As Will Turner and John West observe, “Anecdotal evidence indicates that high numbers of students give scant attention to feedback and are more interested in grades. While some students may be reticent to engage with the feedback, others do not collect assignments and review feedback at all” (Turner and West 2013, 288).

While it is increasingly common for students to submit essays online and receive feedback in the form of legible electronic annotations, writing comments on online submissions is often just as time consuming for the instructor. Moreover, students may have to click on each comment to read it, requiring an extra step that increases the possibility that some comments will go unread. When virtual learning environments are configured to release assignment grades separately from the annotated assignment, it only decreases the likelihood that students will retrieve their submission and carefully review all the marginal comments. Even in the age of online assessment, therefore, it still appears to be the case that “feedback is not as effective as staff imagine,” even though feedback on assessment is one of the most important ways instructors interact with students (Turner and West 2013, 288).

Commenting on students’ work in the form of a video has the potential to improve the feedback experience for both instructors and students. Such videos see the professor speak into the camera about the student’s assessment and then make the video available to the student. For instructors who become practiced at this method it has the potential to reduce the time spent on grading. For students it offers feedback that has a greater impact, which students say they often prefer over written feedback. Students commonly remark that such features as being able to hear the professor’s tone of voice give the feedback greater clarity and resonance. At the same time, video changes the nature of the feedback. While it certainly remains possible to comment on grammatical and mechanical aspects of an assignment, overall the medium most naturally lends itself to discussing an assignment’s intellectual content. Video

feedback may therefore be less appropriate for writing classes than it is for upper-division philosophy classes, where it is naturally at home.

The advantages of video feedback can be seen by examining it from both the professor's and the student's perspective. In discussing the professor's perspective, I share observations based on my experience delivering feedback through video. Turning to the student's view, I discuss qualitative feedback solicited from students that indicates a clear preference for it over written marginalia. In particular, students describe video feedback as more informative, more personal, better at suggesting improvements on future assignments, enhancing the professor's ability to communicate through tone of voice and gesture, and easier to understand compared to written feedback. In addition, student comments suggest ways in which video feedback might be improved, and how it can be of particular value in classes on the philosophy of technology.

<A>Video Feedback: The Professor's Perspective

Creating video feedback is not difficult: any instructor technically proficient enough to send an e-mail can learn to do it. A simple way to begin is to use Photo Booth, a video application preinstalled on current Macintosh computers (and also available for PCs), and Mega, a free file-hosting site. After opening Photo Booth one clicks two buttons to start shooting video, which can then be saved and uploaded to Mega. Video files can be too large to send to students as e-mail attachments, so using Mega enables an instructor to upload each video to an individual Web address. Mega allows the instructor to generate a file that contains both the Web address and a decryption key required to access it. E-mailing the file to the student allows him or her to download and privately view the video.

An alternative option is available to instructors who have students submit assignments via a virtual learning environment (VLE) such as Blackboard, Moodle, or WebCT. The instructor can simply upload the video file to the VLE. This has the added advantage of reducing the chance of inadvertently violating student confidentiality. (In using Mega the instructor has to manually paste the page address and decryption information into an e-mail, which creates the possibility of mistakenly sending the e-mail to the wrong student.) Future VLEs may offer video functionality

that will allow instructors to create and embed video files directly within the VLE, which would make the process simpler and superior still.

Beyond the shift to a new technology, video feedback changes the grading experience for the instructor. In terms of content, it lends itself most naturally to giving feedback that is focused on substantive content rather than assessing grammar and writing, and which indicates to the student ways to improve future work. It has the further benefit of reducing the amount of time an instructor spends on grading.

I offer my own experience as illustration. Prior to using video, my comments on student essays were evenly divided between the intellectual substance of the paper and mechanical issues, such as grammar and spelling. With video the ratio has shifted decisively in favor of substantive comments. Rather than draw attention to every instance of bad writing, I now single out one or two as representative, which I draw to the student's attention by reading them aloud in my feedback. While it remains possible to discuss grammar and spelling in detail should an instructor wish to, the video medium seems best suited to discussing an assignment's intellectual content. This is perhaps because the feedback is spoken and is consciously addressed to the student rather than to particular passages of the assignment. The feedback experience thus becomes more akin to what a dissertation supervisor provides when meeting with a graduate student to go over a thesis chapter. Video feedback resembles this by being more substantive and directed to a person, while still pitched at a level more appropriate for undergraduates.

I find it most natural to begin a video by summarizing the paper's argument in my own words, something which had no equivalent when I gave written feedback, and which forces me to become maximally lucid about what the paper says. I then give critical feedback on what aspects of the argument are well made and what others need work. I make a point to begin and end each video with some positive remarks. Indeed, where my written comments often were devoted primarily to pointing out a paper's shortcomings, delivering spoken comments has seen them change to include a greater degree of "forward feedback" indicating how the next assignment can be improved. Having to speak my comments aloud has made me more conscious of how the student will experience them. Whereas I rarely offered constructive criticism in written comments, I find myself regularly using such phrases as "here's how you can do better next time" or "one way to improve your mark would be . . ." when making

videos. With written feedback I also found it easier to comment on problematic papers than on excellent ones. With bad papers it was easy to note problems, but with first-class essays I sometimes found it hard to say much beyond “nice job.” With videos by contrast I am less motivated to itemize a series of failings, finding it much easier to vocalize the virtues of a paper.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of video feedback for the instructor is that it can reduce the amount of time spent on grading. Achieving this, however, requires conscious effort. One essential is to resist the urge to shoot each video multiple times, which can significantly draw out the process. A second issue concerns note taking. At first I made extensive paper notes about each essay, which I used to generate material for videos lasting five minutes. I soon realized that taking enough notes to cover five minutes of spoken material took as long as giving conventional written feedback, making the overall grading process longer rather than shorter.

Two simple steps eliminated this problem. I reduced the target time of the videos to four minutes and stopped taking notes. With longer videos I sometimes found myself providing comments just to fill time. In addition, when the target time was five minutes I would sometimes go an extra minute or two, even while wondering if students would watch a video that long. While I did not always manage to come in under four minutes, the shorter target length forced me to prioritize and condense my comments. It also made it easier not to take written notes. Instead I just made a mental note of the points I wanted to cover. This slight shift in approach not only made the process go faster but also seemed to result in more disciplined videos.

If video is less time consuming than traditional feedback, it does make demands of its own. Prior to using video, I never had to make a point to get fully dressed or shave before doing my marking. Unlike traditional grading, creating videos means that a family member or roommate entering the room to ask a question can require one to start over. Whereas traditionally I did most of my marking at home, with video I prefer to do most of it in my office on campus, in order to appear more professorial.

<A>Video Feedback: Student Perspectives

How do students perceive video feedback? To answer this question, I had a research assistant administer an ethically approved self-report survey to students in two

philosophy classes that employed video feedback. Students were invited to submit confidential commentaries of approximately two hundred words on any aspect of video feedback, positive or negative, including possible areas of improvement, and were told that comparisons to written feedback were particularly welcome.¹ To avoid the fear of negative comments resulting in retaliation, students were informed that no one other than the research assistant, and certainly not their instructor(s), would have access to their comments until after all class grades were submitted to the registrar. The classes in question were on the philosophy of technology and environmental philosophy. Class participation rates in the survey were 61 percent (twenty-four of thirty-nine students) and 66 percent (twenty-three of thirty-five students), respectively. Of the forty-seven students surveyed, forty-three expressed a positive view of video feedback and explicitly ranked it superior to written feedback. Two students expressed a preference for written feedback, while two did not rank either method above the other.

The most common reason students gave for preferring video was that it was more informative. Fifty-three percent of students surveyed (twenty-five students), expressed this view. The following three comments were typical:

<EXT>I feel that a lot of teachers just give students a grade for their paper without explaining why. Furthermore, when asked why they gave that grade many teachers seem to take offense, seeing your inquiry as a potential insult. . . . [Video] is great because it cuts out the opportunity for the situation to present itself by providing students with a clear rationale for why their paper received the mark that it did.

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The video feedback allows you, as the Professor, to get to explain in depth certain areas of improvement in my argument that you usually could not write all down on the paper when grading.

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On the written feedback, the comments were minimal (usually 1–2 sentences). The video however contained much more detail.<MC>

In addition to finding video more informative, many students found that it fostered a greater connection between professor and student. This aspect was highlighted by 51 percent of respondents (twenty-four students). “I enjoyed it much more [than written feedback],” one student stated, “as it gave me much more of a feeling of engaging with you in relation to the topic. For me personally as a philosophy major, this is something I would much rather have.” This remark was echoed by another student, who similarly praised the way video “creates a personal bond with the professor that every student appreciates.”

These and many similar comments lend support to the observation of a different student, who referred to a general desire on the part of students for more interaction with their professors: “I get the sense that a non-negligible amount of students miss out on the opportunities to interact with their professors throughout undergrad, and this form of feedback enables a sort of replacement for that interaction, where the student can realize the professor’s engagement and interest in their ideas, thereby potentially and ideally creating more commitment to the class.” The overall impression such comments generate is of students hungry for more personal attention from professors. The students in question attend a large research university, and there is the possibility that video feedback may generate a different reaction from students at smaller or liberal arts schools where there is an ethos of greater faculty involvement with students. But as it is, respondents seemed to especially appreciate the feeling of increased personal attention that video engenders.

Other common observations were that video feedback is more helpful in offering constructive criticism regarding how to improve future performance (31 percent of respondents, fifteen students) and is easier to understand (30 percent, fourteen students). Nineteen percent of students (nine students) drew a connection between the video’s increased informational value and the ability to hear the professor’s tone of voice:

<EXT>Video feedback was far superior at conveying a “tone” than is the case with the classic written feedback. This was especially useful in the part where you expressed the parts of my paper that needed improvement. Whereas a written comment on how I could have improved my paper may have been construed as terse, and in turn may have a “cold” tone to it, the

video feedback offered me the ability to accurately grasp the tone that you were putting forth. For instance, when you recommended I add more of an original contribution to my paper, a written comment such as “needs more originality” may leave me confused with *how much* more you were really asking for. However, with a newfound ability comprehend your tone you were able to convey that my lack of originality was not a disastrous omission, but rather one that you would advise me to include if I wish to do well in the future. I believe such is lost in written feedback.<MC>

Other students made similar observations, remarking that tone of voice was better able to communicate the relative importance of different points. “Written feedback is not very dynamic and all comments seem to be the same value and it’s difficult to judge the importance of each one.” Another factor that students cited as contributing to the greater informational content of video over written feedback is that written feedback is sometimes illegible, while a video can be watched multiple times and, unlike a face-to-face-conversation, does not require the student to take notes of what the professor says.

One reason that video may be more effective at suggesting strategies for improvement is that it resonates more with students. One student made this point by contrasting how the same feedback received in writing and video elicited different responses. “My most memorable instance with the video feedback was when [the professor] told me to separate some of my paragraphs, as to separate the multiple ideas within [overly long] paragraphs. I have been told this before but it never set in like it did after receiving video feedback. It didn’t feel like a grading critique (like he was explaining what I did wrong), it felt like a genuine assessment that was meant to help me in my future philosophy writings.”

As I noted above, the video medium lends itself most naturally to a focus on the overall argument of a paper. This aspect was viewed positively by approximately 13 percent of respondents (six students). Six students also observed that unlike written feedback, video sent a clear message that their work had been examined carefully and mattered. “Often [with written comments] you feel like what you spent hours on was graded and tossed aside in minutes. The video feedback eliminated all of these feelings.” Finally, three students suggested that the short nature of the video made it more likely that they would actually receive the feedback. “First of all, I watched the

entire video,” one student noted of the main difference compared to marginal comments. “When receiving written feedback . . . I typically do not read every comment written on my essay. The short . . . video was too brief for me to skip.”²

The most common criticism of video feedback, expressed by 36 percent of respondents (seventeen students) was that it was less focused on individual passages in a paper. As one student put it, “The negative aspects of the video are not seeing exactly where the corrections are unless you exactly remember the organization of your paper.” Clearly, while some students do appreciate feedback that focuses on the paper as a whole, a larger number still have an expectation (surely reasonable) of detailed attention being paid to individual passages. As several students suggested, one natural fix would be to include page or paragraph references in the video when indicating specific passages, something the instructor can do with a minimum of additional work. Other solutions students suggested were to combine video and written feedback, using the latter to single out particular passages (something that is especially easy to do when the paper is submitted through a VLE, which commonly allows papers to be annotated) or to create a split-screen video, with an image of passages in the essay visible alongside the instructor speaking. These suggestions may vary in technical feasibility (creating split-screen videos would seem complex and time consuming), but collectively they suggest that video’s more holistic focus is seen not as a fatal weakness but rather as one that can be addressed by slight modifications in the method.

The second most common criticism of video, expressed by nine students (19 percent of respondents), was that it was awkward to watch. As one student memorably remarked, “Personally I instantly thought of online dating where people would Skype or video chat, so the thought of you sending me a video was weird.” The same student, however, in the next sentence praised video feedback: “But when I watched the video, I felt like it was very helpful and informative. I think video feedback is able to have the student connect with the professor (and I feel like this is good for those students who are more reserved and shy).” This remark was representative of the majority of the students who commented on the awkwardness, in that most attributed it to contingent aspects of their video experience, such as video feedback being less common than written feedback, or something the individual student had not experienced before, and so a drawback that would be lessened by repeated use.

The only other criticism voiced by more than 5 percent of respondents concerned technological issues. Five students commented on such issues as poor audio, the camera moving or being pointed at a distracting stain on the ceiling, and their not being able to easily find the video file on the VLE. While video clearly requires attention to technical detail, the fact that technical problems were rare and nonrecurring was an encouraging sign.

The most negative view of video feedback was expressed by one of the two students who expressed a preference for written feedback. “I think *because* it felt face to face—because technology provided a simulacrum of us casually sitting down, face to face—it felt especially dismissive,” the student wrote. “Even though I knew I have ways to respond, not being able to instantly offer rejoinders or ask questions made me feel especially helpless.” The notion of a one-sided dialogue was also suggested by the other student who did not prefer video: “You are not able to immediately make comments back to the professor and ask for clarifying remarks.”

Both students’ comments suggest that they disagreed with at least part of the feedback, and that the video medium created the unfulfilled expectation of a back-and-forth conversation. The first student noted that this was unlike his or her experience with written feedback, which allowed him or her to first take note of the grade and then “digest criticism in goodly time before deciding whether I agree or disagree.”

This student was commenting on his or her first experience with video feedback. Accordingly, he or she could not have anticipated in advance that this would give rise to a negative reaction. Given that other students may also prefer to first take note of their mark and then go over the comments later, the student’s negative reaction suggests there may be value in informing students in advance that their grade will be revealed at the beginning of the video. That would allow those with a similar preference to find out their grade and then “digest criticism in goodly time.” The feeling of a one-way conversation may also be lessened by ending the video with an invitation to make use of office hours to continue the discussion.

Taken as a whole, student comments indicate a preference for video over written feedback. The positive qualities students associate with video—its being informative, personal, easier to understand, more resonant—are qualities of good feedback as such.

At the same time, they highlight ways in which the nascent feedback method can be improved.

In terms of overcoming awkwardness, one practice to consider is to discuss video feedback in detail before the first class assignment, possibly showing a sample video to the class. In addition, how video feedback is initially presented to students may influence the scope of its adoption. In particular, whether it is initially presented as required or optional may make a difference in how many students embrace it. One approach that appears to work is to tell the members of the class that on their first assignment they will all receive video feedback instead of written feedback, and that each student can choose written or video feedback on subsequent assignments. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when this approach is used it increases the number of students who opt for video feedback on the remaining class assignment to 80 percent or more, whereas only 60 percent of students opt for video on subsequent assignments if it is optional from the start. This suggests that students may need to be nudged to initially try video but once they are familiar with it they come to prefer it.

The propensity for video feedback to gravitate toward both a “big picture” analysis of student work and to focus on content over form may require more effort to use it effectively in first-year or writing-intensive classes, in which detailed attention to grammar is a major focus of instruction. In the context of philosophy classes, however, particularly at the upper-year level, the medium’s in-built bias toward analysis of the argument would seem a welcome feature, one that is in keeping with a focus on argumentative rigor and critical analysis.

Video feedback may be especially suited for use in classes in philosophy and other disciplines that examine technology. This was suggested by the fact that several students studying the philosophy of technology spontaneously drew on class readings in their survey submissions. In particular, students drew on assigned readings by Hubert Dreyfus, a well-known critic of the form of artificial intelligence research common in the 1960s, which was animated by a philosophy of mind that viewed thinking as equivalent to computational functions. The class read Dreyfus’s article “Why Computers May Never Think Like People” (cowritten with Stuart Dreyfus) as well as his more recent book *On the Internet*. Dreyfus frequently makes use of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment, which emphasizes physical embodiment as an essential aspect of consciousness. Whereas Descartes, Turing, and others have

theorized consciousness as not requiring a body, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body structures the mind's experience of the world. When investigating an object, for example, we commonly seek an appropriate point from which to view it, much like finding the right distance from which to view a painting in a gallery. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is one of countless ways in which our body moves to obtain "an optimal grip on the world" (Dreyfus 2009, 54).

On the Internet contains chapters on distance learning and the virtual-world Second Life, deeply informed by Merleau-Ponty. We communicate through gestures and other bodily activities that, Dreyfus argues, Second Life avatars cannot reproduce. Moreover, our status as embodied beings lends an element of risk, and therefore intensity, to face-to-face encounters, in the classroom and beyond, that cannot be fully captured in interactive video lectures. Facing a roomful of students in person, a teacher can get a reading on the class as a whole and how engaged it is by the lecture. "What is lost," Dreyfus writes, "in teleteaching and telepresence in general is the possibility of controlling my body's movement so as to get a better grip on the world" (2009, 59).

Several students made original use of Dreyfus in their commentary on video feedback. Dreyfus invariably criticizes telepresence as an inferior substitute for an in-person encounter. Hence his negative verdict on video as an educational tool, which occurs in the context of juxtaposing distance learning with face-to-face teaching. There is a certain one-sidedness to Dreyfus's otherwise thought-provoking analysis, which two students brought out by applying Dreyfus's analysis to video feedback. As one of them noted, "I wrote about Dreyfus and his take on Second Life and drew comparisons between Second Life and how it falls short with respect to the benefits of face-to-face interactions, yet I found your use of telepresence to assess my paper to be quite useful."

Video feedback does not use telepresence as a replacement for face-to-face interaction. Accordingly, while telepresence can certainly give rise to the negative outcomes Dreyfus notes when it replaces face-to-face encounters, as it may in some models of distance learning, it can also have a positive effect when it replaces written feedback. Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment and the rich forms of communication generated by gesture, body language, posture, and tone of voice would seem to capture this positive aspect of video feedback. In reflecting on video feedback, students who made this observation were demonstrating a command of one of the

philosophies of technology the class covered and extending it in an original way, much as they did in their best essays. In this and other ways, classes with a focus on technology may be enhanced by video not only as a method of feedback but also as a tool that can illustrate or foster critical reflection on class content.

This was well brought home by the philosophy of technology student who provided perhaps the most memorable comment on video feedback. The student in question effectively demonstrated the greater resonance of video by spontaneously sending me a video about video feedback. Much as in the case of the students, my experience watching the video was far more personal and resonant. In one way this was unintended. The student sent me an e-mail informing me of the video, stating, “I thought you might like to see how you personally like receiving video vs. written feedback.” This sentence initially caused me a flash of fear. I interpreted it to say “How do *you* like it?” in the spirit of inflicting on me the same worthless and stupid video feedback I savagely imposed on students. The instant I opened the video it became clear that that was not where the student was coming from at all, as the pleasant and thoughtful commentary made plain. In keeping with the students’ observations about written feedback versus video, writing lacks the tone of voice and other nonlinguistic markers that tell the receiver how to interpret the speaker’s remarks. The real reason the student had created a video was to bring out this more informative aspect, by allowing me to compare the impact of the video with a written document making the same points, which the student also submitted. This aspect of the student’s intent was highly effective. When the student in the video stated, “What I really liked about video feedback is that you can understand the professor’s tone and emotion behind the comments,” it had the full impact of a textured human voice singling me out for address, against which the same idea written down came off as dead and lifeless.

<A>Conclusion

Traditional written feedback is directed toward the assignment. Video feedback, in contrast, is directed toward the student. This switch in focus is one that students generally appreciate. For the instructor, it changes the nature of one’s feedback to make it more positive and forward looking, and focused more on the overall argument

rather than on mechanical detail. These aspects make it a valuable means of providing feedback to philosophy students. Overall video changes the feedback experience itself so that it becomes in some ways akin to that of a coach providing comments, with the instructor not just commenting on mistakes in a student's paper but engaging students in how to improve their work in philosophy. Given that video can be delivered in the same time or less than written comments, and when done with care can assimilate the positive features of written feedback, such as pinpointing particular passages, it is a method that philosophy instructors should consider using to make their feedback more resonant and valuable.

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<FOOTNOTES>

¹ Students who participated were given a 2 percent increase in their final class grade. To avoid the implied expectation that students had to participate in the survey, students were also given the option of completing an alternative assignment for the same reward. The classes in question had a policy of not providing feedback of any kind, written or video, on late work. The one student who completed the alternative assignment had submitted no work on time, and so had never received video feedback.

² One comment I was not expecting came from a student who said that having the video made him want to share the feedback with others. “In the future, it would be helpful to have all my essays with video feedback, because then I could also include links to them in my CV.” This is a good reminder not to include in a video anything one would not want made public, no more than one would in written comments.