Harvard Workshop in Metaphysics and Epistemology: Best Practices

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Objectives of the Workshop

- practice presenting work to a general audience (of non-experts), which is a skill you will need and use for teaching, for writing grant/fellowship applications (in grad school and throughout the career), for the job market, for departmental colloquia (cf. conferences in your AOS) and for talking with colleagues inside and outside philosophy at conferences and at your home institution
- get feedback on work from a general audience (of non-experts)
- create firm deadlines for work
- build a philosophical network
- learn about new areas of philosophy
- practice asking questions at presentations

Procedure

- The presenter has the first 50 minutes to present his/her material (see below for some different presentation options); it is up to the presenter to decide whether s/he would like to take clarificatory questions *during* the presentation.
- We take a 10-minute break so that everyone can both stretch/use the bathroom *and* take a few minutes to think about how s/he might contribute to the discussion.
- Discussion of the material.
- Leave time for discussion of the presentation itself.

Presentation Options

Because you are all at different stages of your graduate career, different forms of presentation will be appropriate and useful to you at different stages. Here are some different sorts of presentation you might consider. You should feel free to consult with the faculty advisor for the workshop *before* your presentation to determine what would be most appropriate and useful to you.

•• ***pre-read with commentary***: in this case, we assign a commentator to your paper; we circulate the paper to everyone a week before the presentation; the commentator works up a short summary of the paper and a couple of points for discussion; the rest of the workshop participants come with two questions or comments prepared for the discussion. On the day of the presentation, you will give a short (max 10 min) overview of the paper; the commentator will offer her or his comments (approx. 20 min); you will have a few minutes to reply; and we will then open the discussion up to the rest of the workshop. This model is appropriate for someone nearing the end of the dissertation who wants practice with APA style presentations.

•• ***read a paper***: this is the classic colloquium model; you write the paper (bearing in mind it is a paper to be *heard* not *read* by the audience); present it to the workshop; we discuss it. This model is appropriate for someone working on

the dissertation who wants to discuss some portion of the dissertation (or some other side project). *NB: for a 50 minute paper, somewhere in the 6500-7000 word range is about right, but do be sure to practice it to get the timing down.*

•• ***presentation***: this is the increasing norm for colloquium and conference presentations (and, of course, the mode you are in as a teacher); rather than read a paper you talk through the material probably from notes or an outline or handout. This model is appropriate, as is the previous one, someone working on the dissertation who wants to discuss some portion of the dissertation (or some other side project). *NB: be sure to practice the presentation to be sure you can cover all the points you want in 50 minutes.*

•• ***present an important piece of literature on your topic***: this is an unusual model, but a skill you will need throughout your career--it's part of the reviewing process, part of writing papers in which you nee to situate yourself in the existing literature, and part of teaching--so it's good to practice it; in this model, you might distribute the article/text to the group ahead of time, and then on the day of the presentation you will situate the article/text in the context of a debate, state the author's thesis clearly, reconstruct the argument for the thesis, raise some questions and concerns that you have (which may include things you are puzzled about); we then discuss it. This model is appropriate for someone either working on the prospectus (and trying to get a handle on the literature that defines the field) or just getting started on the dissertation.

•• ***construct the conceptual space of a philosophical problem***: on this model you will state as clearly as you can a philosophical problem/topic; present different options existing in this literature for attempting to solve/address it; discuss what you take to be some of the main pros and cons of each position; perhaps tell us where you think you will position yourself in that conceptual space and why; we'll then discuss it. This model is appropriate for someone working on the prospectus; it has the advantage of educating the workshop audience on the problem/topic you will be working on during the coming years so that when you later present your own critical and constructive work, the workshop has a sense for the debate in which you are engaging. It's also a great way for the rest of us to learn about an area of philosophy we don't know very well!

Best Practices for the Presenter

The presentation…

- In preparing your presentation, ask yourself what you most want the workshop members to help you with, i.e., what do you most want to get out of the workshop meeting? It might be help with an argument, practice of your delivery skills, help making some technical material accessible to a general audience, etc. Consider making your goal explicit at the start of your presentation so that the rest of the workshop can listen with your aim in mind.
- Attend to both the content and the presentation itself. Even the most polished paper can be hard to digest if it is not presented well, and you want to make yourself understood.

• Provide a handout for the presentation.
• In presenting your work for a general audience (of non-experts), it's important to do three things:

•• ***motivate*** your project; this might mean explaining what drew you into the problem or saying what payoff might come from solving the problem or showing ways in which the problem connects to other areas of philosophy (or issues outside philosophy, whether in other academic disciplines or life)

•• **situate** your project in existing literature

•• **explain your project without jargon**, as free of technical language as you can so that an intelligent but non-expert reader can understand it

• Consider taking the opportunity at the start of your presentation to practice your "elevator speech" to orient (or re-orient) us all to your overall project.

The discussion…

• It is a good idea to *re-state the question in your own terms* to be sure you've understood; this allows the questioner to clarify; this is especially important if you are not sure you have an answer to the question, or that you've understood it.
• If you don't understand the question at all, and can't even attempt to restate it, politely say you've having trouble understanding (and the rest of us will see if we can reformulate the question).

Discussion Norms

• Everyone is expected to participate in the discussion.
• The aim of the discussion is to *help* the presenter strengthen her ideas (much as when we meet with our students, the aim is not simply to *evaluate* the student but to *help her improve*).
• Consequently, we want to keep in mind that there are many ways to contribute constructively to the discussion, for example…

- •• offer a concrete example/illustration of an abstract point being made; often pressing on a concrete example/illustration helps to bring out important points (there will be ways in which it is apt and ways in which it is not, and that's informative)
- •• offer further evidence/reasons in favor of the thesis/argument
- •• ask clarificatory questions (these often lead to substantive questions and can help avoid minutes of missed communication)
- •• point out potentially unseen connections between points being made
- •• offer friendly amendments

The point here is that coming up with "the devastating objection" is often *not* the best way to help the presenter strengthen her ideas, and it makes for an adversarial rather than co-operative atmosphere. It is, of course, important to figure out where the weaknesses are. But try to couple such comments with a suggestion for how to shore up the argument.

• It should go without saying, but: Be respectful. This doesn't simply mean that you should lay off name calling, sarcasm, and eye rolling. (Which of course you should.) Probably the most important (and most difficult) way to demonstrate respect is to *listen carefully* to what others are saying.

• We have agreed as a group that it's unhelpful to ask the presenter a flat "why should anyone care about this topic" question in the context of the workshop, since it naturally puts the presenter on the defensive. It is, however, a *good* idea for everyone to think about the ways in which the topic of the presentation might be related to other topics. It might help if collectively think about the following question: if this problem were solved, what would the implications be?
• Facial feedback. Because there is a handout, there is a good chance that the presenter will look out into the audience and see folks staring at the handout. If you are in the audience, be mindful of what message your face is sending to the presenter. In the spirit of collaboration, it might be helpful for you to look at the presenter every so often. If you are the presenter, don't be discouraged if you don't see looks of approval or nods. Assume the audience is thinking.
• *Procedure:* if you have a question/want to make a comment, raise your hand; if you have a follow up question/comment, raise one finger. The faculty advisor will moderate the queue, trying to step in if any given back and forth takes up too much air time. (But ideally we will all self-monitor!)

Best Practices for the Faculty Advisor

Beginning of Term

• Have a meta-discussion about the workshop itself, both to orient new students and remind repeating students of the objectives of the workshop, the various presentation options, and discussion norms.
• Solicit volunteer to serve as Workshop Czar or Czarina: the student is paid to (a) get (or if a baker looking for an outlet make) food and drink for the workshop; (b) set up and clear said food and drink; (c) make photocopies of student handouts.
• Set up the schedule of presentations. (Options: first come, first serve google doc; submission of preferences to the faculty advisor to tries to fit the curve; randomize choice order.)

During the Term

• Meet with each student after his/her presentation to "debrief" about the presentation itself and to discuss the student's material, progress, plans going forward, etc.
• Offer to meet *in advance* of the presentation in order to discuss ideas, strategize about length, content, best presentation option, etc.
• Serve as scribe: write down the questions/comments from discussion so that the presenter has a record of them. (It is hard to write them down when you are trying to engage with the questioner. The presenter is, of course, free to record the discussion on her phone.)
• Attend to the flow of the discussion: don't let too many versions of the same question be asked as it wears down the presenter; don't let any particular volley go on *too* long; keep an eye out for follow-ups and people who would like to get into the discussion.