Philosophical Dialogue for Beginners: Using PWOL Dialogues to Introduce Students to the Philosophy of Race and Gender

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Abstract

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

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

—Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

**INTRODUCTION**

Pierre Hadot, founder of the contemporary movement to rediscover philosophy as a way of life, thought that philosophy was not just an isolated, theoretical endeavor. Rather, Hadot held that for the ancients philosophy was deeply communal. Students embarked on their philosophical journeys by choosing which school they would belong to and then began to reflect with others how to best bring together the philosophical and the practical. Thus, from the very beginning, the philosophical life was shot through with community, making philosophical reflection “intimately linked to philosophical discourse.”

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

Despite the value of philosophical dialogue, such conversations can be very challenging for novice philosophy students. Not only do students often not know how to contribute to philosophical discussions, but the subject matter of philosophy courses can also be both intellectually and existentially intimidating, discouraging students from striking up philosophical conversations of their own accord. We encountered both of these challenges in our Spring 2021 course “The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender”. Because the course was an elective with no prerequisites, many of our students had not previously taken a philosophy course.
course and were not familiarly with philosophical dialogue. Furthermore, our students brought a number of fears about participating in discussions on race and gender, including that they would accidentally say something racist or sexist\(^4\) or that they would open themselves up to bullying or verbal abuse.\(^5\)

In order to help our students adopt the practice of philosophical dialogue, we created semester-long, PWOL-style dialogue groups to accompany our course. Using training materials created by the Philosophy as a Way of Life Project, and supported by an Innovation in Teaching grant from the \textit{American Association of Philosophy Teachers}, we adopted several elements of the PWOL approach with the hope that the PWOL methodology could be fruitfully applied to helping introductory philosophy students discuss challenging topics like the philosophy of race and gender.\(^6\) In this paper, we outline all of the elements of PWOL dialogues that we incorporated into our classroom, including the format, content, and results of our dialogue groups. In Sections 1 and 2, we share how both PWOL dialogues and our race and gender dialogues focused on living the good life out in community. We then describe, in Sections 3 through 5, how students planned most of the questions and activities associated with our dialogue groups, before concluding in Section 6 by considering how to handle conflict and disagreement in the dialogue setting. PWOL-style dialogue groups were a great fit for our course, and we hope that our experiences will encourage others to implement dialogue groups with newcomers in their philosophy classrooms.

**ELEMENT 1: LIVING PHILOSOPHICALLY**

1.1 Philosophy as a Way of Life Approach

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

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

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

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

\(^7\)For in-depth critiques of the “banking” model of education, see Freire (1970) and Hooks (1994).
is a good life, and how can we live it?"  

1.2 PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE ABOUT RACE AND GENDER  

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

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

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

ELEMENT 2: BUILDING COMMUNITY  

2.1 PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE APPROACH  

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

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8This guiding question is at the basis of all PWOL dialogue groups – see the PWOL Dialogue Instructor Manual (2021a), p. 8.
ophy with their everyday lives when they do so together. It is difficult enough to think philosophically in isolation, much less apply those thoughts to how to act in a particular situation. Having discussion partners to brainstorm with greatly increases the chances that students will be able to draw these connections. Furthermore, creating a close-knit community also helps students become more comfortable sharing their views. Without the mutual understanding found within a warm, familiar community, many students might opt not to share their unique perspectives at all.

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

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

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

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

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9Creating conversational norms is also suggested by researchers working on intergroup dialogues. Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig (2002), for example, advocate creating a set of shared group norms, while Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013) suggest having dialogue participants themselves reach these conversational guidelines together.
• **Don’t Just Jump in When the Water’s Warm**: Challenge yourself to share your reaction even when you disagree or don’t relate.

• **Names Stay, Ideas Leave**: Honor confidentiality by continuing to discuss interesting talking points outside of the classroom, but do so without attaching participants’ names to stories or beliefs.

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

2.2 **Philosophical Dialogue about Race and Gender**

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

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

• “I always feel as if I may say something wrong that may label me as a racist or misogynist”

• “People are afraid to share their opinions that could potentially hurt others or make them look a certain way, whether that could be sexist or racist”

• “The accidental slip up on either side of the conversation where words are used that sound racist but weren’t intended to be racist”

• “The fear that if I say something that someone doesn’t agree with that I’ll get [...] labeled as a racist simply for holding opposing views”

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

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


11 The fears reported here were collected as a part of our efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of PWOL methodology. As part of the course structure, students responded to both pre- and post-course surveys, with the ultimate goal of seeing how students grew throughout the course.
• “I think the most difficult thing about discussing issues surrounding race, gender, and class is when people disregard or don’t validate my personal experiences as a member of a marginalized community and form opinions without listening to people who are hurt and face real consequences”

• “I’ve been in a conversation where my opinion was considered moot due to my race, sex, and perceived class standing”

• “As a Black woman, I have a unique perspective regarding this topic. It’s something I feel very passionate about because it has always affected my life and, based on the current social conflict in this world, it always will. I feel like it’s really easy for people who don’t face repercussions of being a certain race to say it’s ‘biology’ or race ‘doesn’t exist’”

• “As a person of color I’m always afraid someone might say something racist like a racial slur or stereotype that would deeply offend me or hurt my feelings. It also hurts when others don’t understand that we can have conversations with disagreements but not when the opponent’s disagreement is rooted in my oppression”

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

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

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

12Of the students who did not identify as White, approximately 19.9% identified as Hispanic, 9.3% identified as Black, 2.9% identified as Asian, 0.2% identified as American Indian, 0.1% identified as Native Hawaiian, 4% identified as multi-race, 4.6% simply reported that they were non-resident aliens, and a final 1.3% did not respond. For full demographic data, see https://ir.fsu.edu/ facts.aspx.
We then chose two talented undergraduate students and two graduate students to train students for their co-facilitator responsibilities and monitor every dialogue session. These primary facilitators met with co-facilitators before dialogue each week to make sure that the co-facilitators were prepared to lead a constructive conversation. Primary dialogue facilitators were chosen based on their previous familiarity with PWOL and their preparedness to lead dialogue groups, though no previous experience is required. Everything needed to train dialogue facilitators can be found in the Dialogue Facilitator Instructor Manual (2021a), Trainee Manual (2021b), and Trainee Workbook (2021c). Our two graduate student facilitators were paid as regular teaching assistants for the course, while the two undergraduate facilitators were paid through the AAPT Innovation in Teaching Grant. The full class structure is laid out below in Figure 1:

![Diagram of Dialogue Group Structure]

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

To make things a bit more concrete, it will be useful to consider specific norms that worked for some of our groups from Figure 2. These all demonstrate how the more general advice outlined above can be applied in a way that is sensitive to the kinds of issues that might arise when discussing race and gender:
Co-facilitators were responsible for gently enforcing these norms. This meant that each dialogue participant took turns as the defender of the norms, further solidifying their sense of ownership of the way in which the group was run. This allowed students to actively build the type of community that they want to be a part of, both by creating and enforcing the guidelines that informed their conversations.

All of this focus on student leadership may raise the question of whether the PWOL dialogue format, while successfully building community, might nevertheless be detrimental to student learning. Wouldn’t spending more time with leadership from non-experts reduce comprehension of the relevant information? It is important to remember that PWOL dialogues do not simply group students together and ask them to talk about whatever they like. Instead, these conversations are informed by philosophical readings, and the goal is for students to take the potentially abstract ideas from these readings and articulate what they might mean in a practical context. The empirical data on intergroup dialogue is encouraging, suggesting that dialogues actually facilitate the uptake of the relevant information. Keehn (2015), for instance, argues that sharing of personal stories (in the intergroup dialogue context) facilitates the mastery of the relevant concepts. Weinzimmer and Bergdahl (2018) note that, when compared to large lecture courses, intergroup dialogues actually lead to improved...
student comprehension. There is thus reason to think that, far from undermining student comprehension, PWOL-style dialogue groups may actually facilitate improved student learning outcomes.

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

Element 3: Strong Questions

3.1 Philosophy as a Way of Life Approach

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

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

Weak Questions

• Do you think the truth is important?
• Does God exist?
• Are you a Kantian?

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

**Strong Questions**

• How do you seek out the truth in your own life and learning habits?
• Has your religious faith or lack of religious faith ever been challenged? When?
• What types of honesty do you see lacking on our campus?  

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

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

3.2 Philosophical Dialogue about Race and Gender

Co-facilitators were responsible for preparing a number of strong questions before leading their respective dialogue sessions. Their dialogue lesson plans included at least four strong questions, and co-facilitators formulated those questions with the following explicit advice:

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14 More examples of strong questions can be found in the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 34-35.
15 These tips, along with other suggestions for asking strong questions, can be found in the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), p. 9.
1. Ensure that your questions are not amenable to yes or no answers.

2. Ensure that your questions likely lead to more than one answer.

3. Ensure that your questions encourage reflection instead of immediate or obvious replies.

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

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

Figure 3: Examples of Strong Questions

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

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

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

**Example Answer:** The co-facilitator elaborates on how they would answer the strong question, getting the discussion going while simultaneously allowing the other participants time to consider their views.
In preparing their lesson plans, co-facilitators were required to design a think-time strategy to pair with each of their strong questions. During their meeting with their primary facilitator, they would then practice these think-time strategies, rehearsing how they would lead the group without the primary facilitator’s assistance.

**ELEMENT 4: ENGAGING ACTIVITIES**

4.1 Philosophy as a Way of Life Approach

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

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

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

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

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16See the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 22-33.
and family would respond to this statement? Would their perspective be the same as yours?” The facilitator should then allow students to respond to their query. After providing a sufficient amount of time for discussion of the practice statement, the facilitator will then move on to a statement associated with the discussion topic for that particular dialogue session, repeating these steps for each statement that they have prepared for the dialogue meeting.17

4.2 Philosophical Dialogue about Race and Gender

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

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

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

17Complete instructions for the Take a Stand Activity can be found in the PWOL Dialogue Trainee Manual (2021b), pp. 27-28.
conversation about race, but they also planned a number of strong questions to ask as well.

Element 5: Active Listening

5.1 Philosophy as a Way of Life Approach

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

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

5.2 Philosophical Dialogue about Race and Gender

In preparation to lead their dialogue groups, co-facilitators were trained in the practice of active listening, both in listening attentively while dialogue participants were speaking, and in asking follow-up questions to clarify and confirm what was said. The co-facilitators, then, were in a good position to model active listening and create an environment where all contributions were welcomed. As discussed earlier, two of the most cited concerns about participating in conversations on race and gender were related to the way that dialogue members would react to what was said. Some students were worried that they would be interpreted uncharitably, while others were concerned that they would not be taken seriously. Active listening plays a role in alleviating both of these concerns. Beyond promoting deeper engagement, active listening makes it clear to the speaker that what they are saying is being received charitably and reflec-
In our post-course survey, the majority of students reported feeling more comfortable discussing issues of race and gender. Due to the group norms and the practice of active listening, 82% of dialogue participants said that they were more comfortable sharing about these challenging topics, while only 5% reported feeling less comfortable. Full student responses can be found in Figure 4:

![Pie chart showing student comfort levels](image)

**Figure 4: Student Comfort Levels**

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

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

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

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

- “I talk about this class a lot with friends and my roommates; these aren’t generally topics that I’d normally discuss. I do genuinely believe this class
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has given me more confidence in being able to speak my mind, while also listening to what others have to say as well."

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

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

Element 6: Preventing and Resolving Conflict

6.1 Philosophy as a Way of Life Approach

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

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

Like we have already discussed with active listening, in the midst of diversifying the conversation, the facilitator should ask clarifying questions to better understand what speakers are saying. In some cases, students may believe that they are disagreeing even though they may ultimately share the same common ground. Asking further questions to determine whether the disagreement is genuine or illusory is an important step for discovering where the conflict ultimately lies. In the midst of disagreement, it may also be helpful to re-emphasize the
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group norms. At no point in the conversation should participants be violating the conversational norms, and pointing to those principles can be a good way to remind students to be respectful of one another and follow the guidelines that they have established. Lastly, facilitators should not feel the need to spend an inordinate amount of time on themes that bring up disagreements. After they have concluded their planned activity, they should feel free to move on to the next discussion topic. This will reinforce that differences of opinion are normal, not out of place, and should be expected in the course of the dialogue group.

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

6.2 Philosophical Dialogue about Race and Gender

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

Another significant difference between a typical philosophy course and the class we taught on race and gender is how invested students are in the topics we were discussing. In many philosophy courses, students do not enter with a clear sense of how that class might apply to their lives. They can be brought to see the importance, say, of whether the correct understanding of the concept of happiness is fundamentally hedonistic or not, but they do not typically come into the course with an emotional attachment to one position or another. Disagreements, then, are more apt to feel like opportunities to learn something new and investigate novel concepts. Race and gender, however, are often thrust into the political spotlight, and many students may feel that a substantial part of their identity is bound up in particular views on these concepts, making abstract
arguments feel more like personal attacks. Giving a defense of an eliminativist view of race, for example, may strike a student as potentially undermining a substantial aspect of who they are. To make it clear to students that they and their views were not under attack, we encouraged our facilitators to remind the students that our aim is to reach a better understanding of ourselves and those around us, a goal which can only be achieved with the risk of disagreement.

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

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

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

Rate your agreement with the following statement:

It is important to be able to discuss issues surrounding race, class, and gender

![Figure 5: Importance of Intergroup Dialogue](image)

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

After taking this class, are you more or less likely to initiate a conversation on issues surrounding race, class, or gender outside of class?

![Figure 6: Likelihood of Initiating Conversations](image)
Not only did dialogue participants report a greater willingness to initiate these challenging conversations, but, by the end of the course, many students also reported being more willing to listen to those with differing perspectives. In their post-course survey, 73% of students said that they were now more willing to hear someone out who had a different view, while only 4% said that they were now less likely to listen to others. A full summary of responses can be seen in Figure 7:

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

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

- “I think that, for a while, I have been pretty outspoken on my beliefs surrounding race, class, and gender, particularly in high school when I was president of the feminism club. What I struggled with most throughout this time was understanding other viewpoints and having the maturity to discuss them without being insulting or dismissive. After taking this class, my appreciation for other viewpoints does not come from a place of agreeing with them by any stretch; in fact, I feel even more strongly about my opinions. However, I am more intrigued by the possibility of other viewpoints – their validity, morality, basis, and most importantly, why they aren’t sound to me and the potential flaws they present in my own arguments. Overall, this class has encouraged me to think deeper about why people believe what they do and why opinions can differ so greatly.”
• “This class has allowed me to understand different viewpoints for many arguments I had never previously considered. I am more equipped for conversations with people who have opposing views.”

• “I think by hearing so many different opinions on topics I not only learned more about other people’s perspectives, I was also able to adjust my own. This class allowed me to see other people’s struggles and their reasoning for thinking the way they do.”

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

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


