Multimedia Instructional Technology in the Philosophy Classroom
A Brief Primer

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, many universities are attempting to integrate new multimedia instructional technologies into the curriculum and the classroom. How should lecturers in traditional humanities disciplines, like philosophy, respond?

Are there ways that philosophy can be taught in this new environment which will supplement traditional interaction in critical thinking and philosophy? Are there ways in which this new technology can complement our work without undermining the rigour of traditional philosophy instruction? We believe that there are such ways, and in this brief primer we will point toward several hopeful avenues for further exploration. First, we will describe a typical computer projection system. Second, we survey several different types of multimedia presentations. Finally, we offer some general guidelines about how to use the presentations in the classroom.

Multimedia Projection Equipment

What kind of equipment is necessary for this endeavour? A variety of options are available. Every department, school, and university will have to address how much money to invest in this presentation equipment.

A mobile multimedia unit offers one of the most economical options. The necessary equipment is usually attached to a sturdy four-wheeled cart. The multimedia unit will contain at least a computer and a high-power overhead projector with a LCD panel mounted on it. A video cassette recorder can also be mounted on the cart. This configuration produces translucent images which can be shown on the type of projection screen found above most classroom chalkboards. Despite the economic benefits, there are severe limitations to using a multimedia cart. First, the visual image is frequently small. It is difficult to place the cart at an appropriate distance from the front of the room without disrupting the classroom seating arrangement. Secondly, this system generally produces images of very poor quality; videos are especially poor. Unfortunately, the image is not strong enough to compete effectively with the ambient light found in most classrooms. To enhance the quality of the images sufficiently, it is usually necessary to darken the room to such an extent that students have difficulty taking notes. Third, the mobile cart must be connected to electrical outlets and Ethernet connections. These electrical cords can present real physical hazards for professors who walk around the room while lecturing. Finally, the cart itself creates an imposing physical obstacle that separates the students from the professor. Both students and lecturers have difficulty seeing over the cart. While you can still reap many of the educational benefits that we will enumerate, the cart-based system

does feel somewhat like an iron cage. Constantly moving this unwieldy bulky equipment from the storage closet to the classroom may evoke an uncomfortable sympathy for Sisyphus struggling to push the rock up the hill each day.

If funds are available, the creation and utilization of a 'smart' classroom is highly preferable. A 'smart' classroom provides a faculty member the opportunity to incorporate a variety of media into the instructional process without the drawbacks of the mobile cart. The equipment is permanently mounted in the classroom in such a way that it minimizes the disruption of the pedagogical space. The permanent projection system generally includes a LCD projector that is attached to the ceiling of the classroom. It projects large, clear images onto an electronically controlled screen. The screen is generally mounted above the chalkboards. You can control the movement of the screen with a switch installed on the wall. Similarly, the faculty member operates the projector with a hand held remote. As a result, it is very easy to turn the projector on and off and retract the screen with the touch of a button should you choose not to use the equipment during some segment of class. A VCR or DVD player and a basic audio system comprised of receiver and speakers round out the audiovisual capabilities in the room.

Types of Computer Presentations

The possibilities for what appears on the screen are almost limitless. One can access the Internet or campus network databases, play audio or videotapes and disks, or project images to the screen with a document camera. To elaborate briefly, one can project any computer generated software presentation. Videos can be displayed through the VCR and short digitized video clips can even be incorporated into the presentation itself. Discussions of advertising techniques in a Critical Thinking course might benefit from showing excerpts of *Wayne's World* or *Crazy People*. Video-taped commercials are also easy to discuss and analyze for fallacies in this context. A document camera , such as the ELMO Visual Presenter EV-400AF we use, provides the lecturer with the ability to project any image onto the screen for shared viewing. For example, a magazine advertisement, or an unusual edition of a philosophy text that one has run across in a second hand store over the weekend, can be easily incorporated into a pre-existing presentation without scanning the image into a digitized format. With appropriate Internet access, lectures can incorporate images found on numerous web sites. *Perseus* is excellent resource for classical philosophy (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/)

To take advantage of the audio system, one can play CDs. For example, the Indigo Girls *Galileo* gives an Early Modern Philosophy course an interesting contemporary relevance.

Similarly, Marilyn Manson and Nine-Inch Nails can be incorporated into a Nietzsche lecture. Sheryl Crowe's *All I Wanna Do is Have Some Fun* provides a provocative introduction to Kierkegaard's *Aesthete*, and many segments of *Seinfeld* nicely illustrate the mindset of the Aesthete. Given all these technological capabilities, an obvious question is how best to maximize their pedagogical use.

There are a number of different kinds of computer presentations. On the most basic level, one can use the computer projection equipment as little more than an efficient overhead projector. However, this 'projector' requires you neither to create nor manage confusing transparencies that always seem to stick together nor constantly to manipulate that ever-present sheet of paper that hides and then reveals your next point or points. Using a word document instead, you can simply scroll through the lecture at your desired pace. Smart rooms will be connected to the university computer network, which means that lecturers can access documents directly from their office computers, not worrying about bringing the wrong disk (or losing the disk on the way) to class. Depending on the type of network and speed of your smart room computer processor, you may find it helpful to download a copy on to the smart room computer, thereby speeding up file access. See your university IT staff for guidance.

You can also utilize materials off the World Wide Web. Many lecturers place materials on the Web (such as a lecture outlines and notes, lists of important terms and concepts, answers to homework exercises in logic, numbered premises for a formal argument, etc.) or links to existing materials at other institutions. One need only click on the Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer icon to go to a philosophically oriented site, like the Nietzsche web site at USC (http://www.usc.edu/~douglast/nietsche.html), the abundant Plato resources at Evansville (http://plato.evansville.edu), or the highly developed Episteme Links (http://epistemelinks.com/). For instance, Clarke College has set up a marvellous Internet site on *The Last Days*

Fig.1 The Nietzsche web site at USC.

of Socrates (http://socrates.clarke.edu/). If you are lecturing on the *Euthyphro*, you can go to this site and display their excellent maps and illustrations. You can show the students exactly where King Archon's Porch was with respect to the courts and the prison. You can also access many complete classical works.

Pedagogical benefits of using the Internet in classroom presentations

You can also make multimedia presentations with a software package like PowerPoint. A multimedia presentation enables you to move through a lecture clearly and effectively, highlighting major points and illustrating their relevance and implications for future inquiry. These presentations employ a great variety of color and background images. They are especially helpful for enumerating various claims in an argument or demonstrating typologies of belief, interpretation, or application.

Fig.2 The Last Days of Socrates site at Clarke College.

A number of excellent presentation software programs are available, including Authorware, Claris and Hypercard. We use PowerPoint for several reasons. First, PowerPoint is readily available in both Macintosh and PC formats. Second, one can learn the basics of how to use it in less than an hour. Third, one can incorporate images and video clips into the presentation quite easily. The newest version of PowerPoint allows you to use GIF images meaning that one can download images from the Internet and incorporate them into a presentation without having to use a graphic converter to get them into PICT format. Four, the finished product is both visually compelling and easy to use in the classroom. The main drawback to PowerPoint is that you cannot make a last minute change to the slides while presenting them.

How do you create a PowerPoint lecture? An introductory lecture on Thales can serve as an example. Suppose you have a set of basic lecture notes in a word processing document. One can either re-type the information while updating or making changes to the

lecture, or, keeping the word document open, simply transfer the necessary information into the PowerPoint slide system. Each point you wish to make should have its own slide. The Thales lecture has ten slides. The first has a picture of a bust reputed to be of Thales. Dr X usually begins with an introductory outline slide. She spends a couple minutes giving a preview of what the presentation will cover. The next slide has a link to a brief digitized clip of Chevy Chase's movie, *Memories of an Invisible Man*. Chevy Chase's character has wandered into an enormous scientific facility to attend a lecture and the lecture begins with a reference to science beginning with the inquiries of Thales. The next slide turns the attention back to Greece where a detailed map of the Aegean appears. The map allows her to point out the location of Miletus and also its relation to other important cities. She also includes an image of the excavated harbour of Miletus and several pictures of the rugged Milesian coastline. For example, suppose that you are discussing the harbor at Miletus, you can easily flip back to the image of the coastline. Suppose that you are mentioning Nietzsche's view that this utterance is important because it occurs in language devoid of fable, you can show the images of the water around Miletus again. The presentation continues with the actual fragments we discuss, it includes the references to Thales in the *Theaetetus* and ends with several observations that Nietzsche makes about the importance of Thales' utterances in philosophy in the *Tragic Age of the Greeks*.

Hints for Using the Presentation in the Classroom.

This is the easy part. Instead of carrying reams of paper notes into the class with you, take a copy of the presentation file on a zip disk. You walk into the classroom, turn on the computer and the projector. You pull down the screen, turn down the lights. You place the zip disk into the computer. Select the presentation file and click on it. Select 'View Slide Show' and you are ready to go. You move from slide to slide using the remote mouse controller. This enables you to control the pace of the lecture/discussion very easily. If students are moving ahead to another point you can flip ahead several slides. If they are digressing on a particular point, you can simply click to the next slide and refocus their attention. You can also move back to previous slides. If a student raises a question at the end of class about an initial point, you can easily move to the slide in question. Since you are using the computer, you might well want to show students the entry on Thales in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/text/presoc/presoc.htm) or remind them of the Perseus site. If so, simply exit the presentation software and use the Internet search engine on the computer.

Some general observations about making presentations are in order. One, you may find that the pace of your lecturing increases. Since you do not have to write any information on the chalkboard, you may be ready to move onto the next point before the students are. Be aware of this new pace and adjust as necessary. Second, as a general rule, the less text on a computer slide, the more effective the slide. A slide filled with text overwhelms the student and undermines the principal asset of presentation software—highlighting and emphasizing major points. Particularly when students are not used to this kind of presentation format they tend to feel that they must get absolutely everything down in their notes. If you move on before they are ready, you may well hear groans of protest, though one way of addressing this concern is to prepare an Internet version of the PowerPoint outline. One can easily convert a PowerPoint presentation into HTML. Before or after class, simply upload the new document onto the web and link it to either the web version of the syllabus or to a specific PowerPoint page. Both types of pages are easy to create and maintain.

Third, it is a good idea to write down the identifying information, about any visual source you use. Students will invariably ask what the image is, and it helps to have information about the title, artist, date, and original location readily available. This information also helps place the image in a context. As a result, students treat the image as something important to the presentation, as something worthy of understanding in its own right, and not just background picture, intellectual wallpaper, or entertaining, visually compelling filler.

Fourth, be sure to spend some time out of class working with your smart room computer. Even the most technologically proficient lecturer will from time to time experience embarrassing difficulties trying to 'get the computer to do what we want.' This observation is particularly important for creating PowerPoint documents. Even when everything works well, the slide that appears on the screen in the classroom may not be as vibrant or colorful as the one you thought you were creating when you set up the lecture in your office. Too much light in a room can be devastating to a presentation like this.

Conclusion

We hope to have provided a sense of the enormous pedagogical potential that multimedia computer projection equipment offers. Elsewhere, we discuss how the use of these presentations can enhance the development of critical thinking skills in the average philosophy student (Bowery and Moore, 1999). In appropriating multimedia technology for the philosophy classroom, it is important to remember the distinctions Aristotle makes between the intellectual virtues. *Techne* has a place in the life of our intellectual communities. This place should be neither diminished, exaggerated, nor misunderstood. Technology is a tool that can make a marvelous contribution to the great conversation which is philosophy.

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