

# Using Interview Projects in the Teaching of Philosophy

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# Overview

- Setting
- Goals
- Methods
- Results
- Lessons Learned
- Exercise
- Questions

# Setting



- St. Joseph's College in Patchogue NY
  - Four year undergraduate college
  - Suburban commuter college
- Department of Philosophy
  - No Philosophy Major but a recently registered major in Philosophy and Religious Studies

# Courses

## **Wendy C. Turgeon**

- Philosophy and Women course: 18 students, all years
- Aesthetics course: 12 students, all years
- Twice a week daytime classes

## **Michael L. McClain**

- Introduction to Ethics: 26 students, all years
- Once a week evening class

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## McClain: Goals for Students

- Better appreciate 'real life' implications of ethical theory
- Gain broader perspective
  - Avoid dogmatism
  - Avoid sense of 'anything goes'
- Enhance ability to articulate ethical principles in conversation and in writing
- Better understand importance of coherence in ethical thought

## McClain: Method

- Each student selected a 'thoughtful and ethical' person to interview
- Contracted with the person to conduct three interviews
- Interviewed person using a set of questions developed by the instructor
- Reported results in group discussions, formal presentation, and in paper

# McClain: Method

- Big questions
  - How is the world organized and what can we know about it?
  - How should we understand human life?
  - How do you make important decisions?
  - What are your ethical principles?



## McClain: Method

- Students reported on interviews in weekly group discussions
  - Relatively thoughtful and respectful sharing of ideas
  - Various levels of sophistication and participation
  - Wide range of views expressed
- Students submitted three written reports
  - Reports due two weeks after interview
  - Final cumulative report, integrating all three interviews
  - Comments on each draft

# McClain: Method

- Each student gave formal oral presentation
  - Summarized interviews
  - Most were nervous, resistant
- Grade for project included
  - Progress in writing paper
  - Quality of involvement in class discussions
  - Quality of final paper and presentation
    - Content and style

## Turgeon: Goals for Students

- Relate readings and class discussions to life experience of contemporary role models
- Reinforce/challenge theoretical perspectives with experiential expeditions
- Reflectively restate and integrate views expressed by thoughtful interviewees
- Explore how issues raised in class affect the lives and careers of contemporaries

# Turgeon: Method

- Students interviewed a person not known to them [although this had to be adapted]
  - List of interviewees developed by instructor with invited input from students
  - Calendar was established with due dates for each step
- Class developed questions as a group
- Students arranged and conducted interviews
  - Interviews conducted individually or in pairs
  - Written notes, tape recording, photo
- Students reported results in essay

# Turgeon: Method

## **Selecting potential interviewees:**

- Finding artists and women willing to be interviewed
- Getting contact information
- Having students select their person
- Establishing interview guidelines

**Class discussions** reviewed the format for the required paper: clear account of the dialogue accompanied by commentary by the student on how the ideas presented by the interviewee connect to the questions and themes in our class.

## Turgeon: Method

- At the end of the semester, we had a round table session where students shared their experiences and what they found most interesting, surprising or expected from the interview. Students could question one another about the interview as well.
- The students really were eager to hear about others' interview experiences.

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## McClain: Results

- The goals of the project were generally met
  - Students were able to articulate ethical principles of 'real live' people
  - Most, though not all, said their horizons were broadened
  - Although there was wide diversity among the views of those interviewed, relativism was not a major theme
  - Students developed writing and presentation skills as the result of practice and feedback
  - Coherence was often interpreted in terms of stereotypes



# McClain: Student Evaluations

- At the end of the semester, students completed anonymous evaluations of the project
  - Generally but not universally positive
  - Students enjoyed opportunity of learn more about the person they interviewed
  - Impressed by diversity of views
  - Found discussion and feedback helpful
  - Complained about the questions and the oral presentation
  - Suggested interviewing each other

# Turgeon: Evaluation

Some Common Problems encountered:

- Student never gets around to picking a person
- Student cannot make contact
- The interviewee backs out or is hard to find
- Dealing with shyness and comfort levels

# Turgeon: Evaluation

- The goals of the project were generally met. Several students either did not do the project or did so cursorily. The majority experienced anxiety about it but afterwards were excited to share their findings.
- Students were able to engage their interview subject in serious dialogue and reflect on how the ensuing ideas connected to the course readings and discussions.

# Turgeon: Student Evaluations

On the final exam, students were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What did you like best about the interview project and why?
- What did you like least about the project or found most difficult?
- Do you think that interviewing someone you know or a stranger is more worthwhile? Explain.
- In what ways did your comprehension of our class readings and discussion topics affect your interview experience? In what ways did the interviewee offer perspectives on our topics? Give one example and discuss.
- Would you recommend this project for future classes? With any suggested changes? Why or why not? (Do not worry about how you answer this; all honest appraisals are welcome.)

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# McClain: Lessons Learned

- Students were able to complete the project with a minimum of difficulty
- Interviews can be an effective teaching technique in Ethics, but
  - Questions should be focused and intelligible
  - Expectations and grading criteria should be explicit
  - Assigning two interviews is better than three (or one)
  - Methods for engaging the students' cognitive skills should be designed into the project

## Turgeon: Lessons Learned

- Students were able to complete the project and expressed delight at the opportunity to connect philosophy with “the real world.” As non-majors these students benefitted from a perspective of applied philosophy
- Interviews can be a useful supplement to a philosophy course, especially for students who are not directly engaged in the discipline.

# Turgeon: Lessons Learned

- In the future I will work on expanding my pool of potential interviewees, allowing students to interview people they know but still encouraging them to venture outside their comfort zone.
- Providing a rubric for construction and evaluation may assist students in making more explicit connections to the readings of the course.



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# Exercise

- Organize into pairs
- Interview one another
  - Two questions
  - Five minutes each/Ten minutes total
- Five minutes to prepare report of interview
- Brief reports on interview

# Interview Questions

- What interested you most about philosophy that led you to study it seriously?
- Which of your teachers most influenced you?

## Questions/Comments?

- In what course would you like to try implementing an interview project?
- How would you go about finding interview subjects or encourage your students to find them?
- What enhancements can you suggest to connect this project more tightly to curriculum?

# Contact information

- For a copy of this Powerpoint, visit [http://faculty.sjcny.edu/~wturgeon/\\_wturgeon/index.html](http://faculty.sjcny.edu/~wturgeon/_wturgeon/index.html)