

Effective task design and sample in class activities

In a TBL classroom a significant amount of time is devoted to critical engagement with the course material. Effective task design is one of the most important factors for successful learning. To develop students's critical thinking and reflection it is crucial to design task that not only focus on comprehension of the material, but also ask students to apply a theory to a new example or situation, and to evaluate theories. Accordingly, I aim to prepare tasks of all the different categories:

COMPREHENSION

- Recall information (the aim is understanding, not literal memorisation)
- Restate accurately in one's own words
- Give illustrations of a position
- Identify ambiguities and vague statements

ANALYSIS/APPLICATION

- Apply concept theory to particular examples or scenarios
- Compare and contrast theories
- Analyse premises and conclusion of arguments

EVALUATION

- Predict consequences
- Identify underlying background assumptions
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of a position or argument
- Make judgements
- Considering objections and responses

I have learned to appreciate that it is not always necessary to begin with comprehension tasks, because students can learn more if they manage to master more complex tasks. In order to complete an application task successfully, students must be familiar with the relevant theory. Comprehension tasks are commonly built into application tasks and by starting with more complex tasks students are often prompted to return to the relevant text or course materials that introduce the theory. In my experience this is an effective way to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning.

All of these types of tasks are suitable to be combined with the 4S task design model that I often use to stimulate discussions and to integrate all students into the class discussions. 4S tasks have the following features:

- All students think about the **same** problem.
- The problem has to be **significant** in the context of the course.
- All students have to make a **specific** choice, either individually or in teams.
- All students have to **simultaneously report** their individual or team answers.

The tasks could be multiple choice questions, questions with yes/no answer options, matching tasks, ranking exercises, etc.¹ I find it effective to give students time to first identify an answer individually, then to discuss everyone's answers in their teams and to select one answer in their teams. Before we start the discussion with the entire class, all teams will then report their team answers simultaneously, either by showing an answer card, writing a ranking, one word, or up to one sentence on the board, etc. Controversial questions can be helpful to spark class discussion that prompt students to discuss and assess their reasons in support of the different answer options.

Comprehension Task: Locke, Berkeley, Hume

Consider the following statements and match them with the philosophers who endorse them:

- A. Substances exist.
- B. Material substances exist.
- C. Immaterial substances exist.
- D. Thinking material substances exist.
- E. We are not in a position to know whether substances exist.
- F. Substances do not exist.

- Which of the above does Locke endorse?
- Which of the above does Berkeley endorse?
- Which of the above does Hume endorse?

Application Task: Elisabeth's Objection to Descartes's Mind-Body Dualism

Assume you are pushing a trolley around the supermarket. According to Elisabeth, which of the following factors are relevant for explaining the movement of the trolley?

- A. The way in which the movement is initiated.
- B. The way in which you are pushing the trolley through the supermarket.
- C. The material of the wheels and of the floor in the supermarket.
- D. All of the above.

Relevant text from Elisabeth's Correspondence with Descartes:

"For it seems that all determination of movement happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, in the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me to be incompatible with an immaterial thing." (AT III:661)

¹ For a more detailed discussion see Bill Roberson and Billie Franchini, "Effective Task-Design in the TBL Classroom"; Kimberly Van Orman, "Teaching Philosophy with Team-Based Learning".

Analysis/Application Task: Locke and Leibniz on personal identity

Consider the following scenario:

Assume you get really drunk. On your way home you don't realise that your professor is on the street. You run into your professor and she falls and breaks her leg. The next morning it is impossible for you to remember that you ran into your professor last night.

In such a case, are you morally accountable for the fact that your professor has a broken leg?

According to Locke, you are.

According to Locke, you are not.

According to Leibniz you are.

According to Leibniz, you are not.

Evaluation Task: Locke and Leibniz on innate ideas

Which of the following is the most pressing point of disagreement between Locke and Leibniz?

- A. The origin of our idea of a tree.
- B. The question of God's existence.
- C. The question whether innateness can be defined in terms of universal consent.
- D. The origin of mathematical ideas.
- E. The question whether we acquire some ideas by means of experience.

Evaluation Task: Spinoza's system

Spinoza defines God as follows:

1d6: "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each expresses an eternal and infinite essence."

Assume Spinoza would instead have given the following definition:

1d6*: By God I understand an infinite substance, which consists of the attribute of thought, which expresses the essence of the substance.

Would Spinoza still be able to prove substance monism?

- A. Yes
- B. No

If so, why? If not, how would it change his metaphysical system?

Sample in class activity that focuses on team behaviour

I ask my students to engage with the following task at the end of week 2:

Spinoza on contingency/determinism/necessitarianism

- **As a team your task is to decide whether Spinoza's philosophical system leaves room for contingent events.**
- Assume the following is the case:
 - * One team member has not done the reading and does not want to contribute.
 - * Three team members believe that Spinoza's theory leaves room for contingent events.
 - * One team member believes that Spinoza endorses necessitarianism.
 - * One team member does not know what the difference between contingency, determinism and necessitarianism is.
- **How do you reach agreement in your team?**

The rationale for giving students a task like this is to address, and eliminate or reduce, potentially difficult team member behaviour early in the semester and to empower teams to develop strategies to address problems such as the free rider students. It is meant to encourage teams to take responsibility for their own learning and learning environment.

I expect some students will notice that the view that is presented as the majority view here is mistaken. [Spinoza scholars disagree whether he endorses determinism or necessitarianism.] This is meant to generate a discussion about the importance of listening to all team members and the importance of basing team positions on reasons and arguments and, as applicable, textual evidence.

Sample of formative assessment tasks

Letter to Locke or Leibniz

Write a letter of no more than 500 words to either Locke or Leibniz. Tell Locke or Leibniz in your letter why you think his account of personal identity is convincing or why you believe it should be rejected or revised.

Targeted skills: Effective critical evaluation of a view

The important point of this assignment is that you offer a good **critical evaluation** of Locke's or Leibniz's account of personal identity and show that you've thought for yourself about the relevant arguments.

To be **submitted electronically** via the LMS on **21 April** by 11:59 pm. Please bring a **hard copy** to class on **22 April**.

Note that this assignment counts as two short assessment tasks and will be assessed as satisfactory/unsatisfactory. It is a hurdle requirement that you complete at least 70% of the short assessment tasks satisfactorily.

Team Name:

Letter to Locke or Leibniz

Individual activity

- Read the letters of your other team members.
- Identify the letter that offers the strongest critical evaluation of Locke's or Leibniz's views about personal identity.

Team activity

- As a team discuss your individual selections until you all agree on one letter that offers the strongest critical evaluation of Locke's or Leibniz's arguments.
- As a team complete the report below.

REPORT

As a team we believe that the letter by _____ offers the strongest critical evaluation of Locke's or Leibniz's account of personal identity.

The letter presents the following thesis:

The author offers the following arguments in support of the thesis:

Does the author consider objections to his/her arguments? If so say what the objections are:

Does the author present plausible responses to the objections? If so say what the responses are:

Do you have any suggestion how this letter can be improved?

Letter to Locke or Leibniz

After you've completed your report, your team will be asked to write a **summary** on the board.

Your summary should include

- A thesis
- Up to four bullet points outlining the arguments that support the thesis

Note that you can include arguments from more than one letter.

Thesis:

Arguments to support the thesis:

-
-
-
-

Team member evaluations

Students work in permanent teams in a TBL classroom and complete some tests as teams. It is absolutely crucial for the success of every student and for the success of the teams that the teams work as effectively as possible. The strategy that is used in a TBL classroom to ensure this is that students assess the performance of all their team members. They complete two rounds of informal peer evaluations throughout the semester. This feedback is meant to be constructive and intended to help teams and individual students to improve their performance. At the end of the semester they complete a final round of peer evaluations and this score counts 5% towards their final grade. Peer evaluations are important to establish a sense of fairness.

Because students evaluate each other's performance as team members I believe that it is important that they take part in the selection of the criteria that they use to assess each other's performance.

I usually reserve some time during week 3 of the semester to have a discussion with my students in class about the peer evaluations. I prepare a list of possible criteria and each team has to select three criteria that they regard as most important and be ready to explain why they selected these specific criteria. They can either select criteria from my list or add criteria of their own. Each team then presents their preferred criteria and we have a discussion with the entire class before we select the final criteria. In 2015 my students agreed that **preparation, contribution** and **respect for others** were the criteria that they regarded as essential.

To make sure that students are willing to provide honest and constructive feedback it is important it is important to treat their feedback anonymously. This can be done by using the software such as ipeer or TEAMMATES, by designing tests within Blackboard or similar learning management systems.

All students in my class completed the following evaluations for each of their team members. I make very clear that there is no point in giving every student top scores, because this would defeat the purpose of improving the team performance.

Evaluation of Team Member Performance

Preparation

How prepared is this team member for in-class discussions and activities? Has s/he read the relevant texts thoughtfully before class? Is s/he bringing the relevant texts to class? Is s/he trying her best to come ready to class?

- 1 Unacceptable.
- 2 Very poor.
- 3 Poor.
- 4 You need to make significant improvements.
- 5 You need to make improvements.
- 6 Acceptable, but you can make some improvements.
- 7 Good, but you can make some smaller improvements.
- 8 Excellent. Keep doing what you're doing.
- 9 Excellent. You're impressive.
- 10 Outstanding. You're doing more than I can expect.

Contribution

How willing is this team member to contribute to team discussions and in-class activities? How relevant and constructive are the contributions? Is the contribution focused on the relevant texts and arguments? Is s/he speaking up when possible and also giving the other team members equal opportunities to contribute?

- 1 Unacceptable.
- 2 Very poor.
- 3 Poor.
- 4 You need to make significant improvements.
- 5 You need to make improvements.
- 6 Acceptable, but you can make some improvements.
- 7 Good, but you can make some smaller improvements.
- 8 Excellent. Keep doing what you're doing.
- 9 Excellent. You're impressive.
- 10 Outstanding. You're doing more than I can expect.

Respect for others

Is this team member interacting with all other team members in a respectful manner? Is s/he listening to others and willing to accept disagreements? How willing is s/he to assist other team members?

- 1 Unacceptable.
- 2 Very poor.
- 3 Poor.
- 4 You need to make significant improvements.
- 5 You need to make improvements.
- 6 Acceptable, but you can make some improvements.
- 7 Good, but you can make some smaller improvements.
- 8 Excellent. Keep doing what you're doing.
- 9 Excellent. You're impressive.
- 10 Outstanding. You're doing more than I can expect.

Please comment on your answers above. [Answer required]

What is the single most valuable contribution this person makes to your team? [Answer required]

What is the single most important thing this person could do to help your team more effectively? [Answer required]