What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?
Developing skills to read and write effectively about philosophy

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Abstract: *"Orientation" is the perennial task of any university or college education. Without providing tools of orientation, the university fails. The American university follows the tutorial concept of Oxford as paradigm. Large undergraduate classes from Harvard to Oneonta seem to undercut the concept of such personalized forms of orientation. However, modern society needs the educational ideal as formulated by Immanuel Kant: "Enlightenment" as escape from media- or "self inflicted tutelage"(WA). The SUNY Board of Trustees, in adopting the resolution requiring assessment of student information management and critical thinking skills, seems to aspire to Kant's ideal. The place of reference for orientation logically remains the library, physically or virtually. With guiding help, critical readers are able to orient themselves and others by referring to relevant sources without blindly following opinions.*

The study of primary and secondary texts in philosophy allows students to develop the capacity to orient themselves in a more and more complex reality. Moses Mendelssohn has pointed out that orientation is necessary for the condition of enlightenment. Orientation allows one to place knowledge, and to find a way to autonomy. Kant's successor at Königsberg (Krug) addressed the need for orientation in his philosophical dictionary: "To orient oneself means to find the orient or place on the horizon where the sun rises at the time of the solstice, hence, we can determine the other world regions." The purpose of the collaboration between a philosopher and a librarian was to achieve orientation in the subject field and to develop information literacy skills the students could use in the future. Partnerships between teaching faculty and librarians have been utilized at many colleges and universities in order to address the information management components of the curriculum (Owusu-Ansah). The orientation module developed at the College at Oneonta provides students with tools that allow mapping the field of their study on their own, given that standpoints are supposed to differ. Successful orientation through the library as place of truly independent study allows combining the benefits of tutorial teaching with the necessities of instruction in larger classes. One need not

possess Socratic wisdom to recognize the problem: students enter philosophy classes largely innocent of basic research methodology. Students lack facility with primary and secondary sources, thus failing to properly engage the material. Their inability to do so often results in papers that merely repeat the points found in uncritically absorbed sources from the Internet, or even leads to fraudulent behavior that violates intellectual property rights.

It can be argued that an increasingly complex reality needs more broadly spread knowledge, and that the half-life of skill-related learning is declining: to teach specific skills successfully does not mean that the student will be able to develop the necessary transfer skills in a (technologically) uncertain future. Plato and Aristotle agreed on the necessity to gain knowledge so that we see the "*holon*" (Wirth 105), the whole: Kant claims that abstract, not applied thinking is necessary to combine logically. The freedom to think becomes the last probing stone of truth (Kant *WDO* 146/ Richardson 407). For any successful application of knowledge, orientation is necessary. A solid foundation in the liberal arts allows such orientation: it is its precondition, if the skills have to be updated at a later point in life. Lifelong learning is only successful if the foundations are solid: quantitative and qualitative knowledge has to be conveyed in a value-building environment. These goals of society transcend the needs of any liberal arts class. They are the reason why a classical liberal arts foundation was required in Humboldt's model of education. To orient oneself means to find one's place, but also to be able, figuratively, to know. Training in applied skills alone does not prepare for change. In the platonic sense, it is not an art. To know how to find which resources, to evaluate them correctly and to integrate the knowledge into independent work is a first step into the right direction. Orientation allows finding pathways to autonomy. Kant: "To *orient* oneself, in the proper sense of the word, means to use a given direction …" (*AA* VIII 134) Orientation needs knowledge here and now, but also a sense of direction. Kant is aware of this problem: "But to enlighten an age, is very wearisome" (Richardson 407).

This project attempts to link an increase in literary orientation, which provides the necessary resources for better papers and increases the students' critical thinking skills, with the assumption that well-informed students will cheat less (in opposition to McCabe/Pavela, who assess normal written cheating around 50%). The goal of this teaching module is not so much to focus on ethics, but on knowledge, with an intended moral side effect. Students will acquire the skills to read and write effectively about philosophy. Students will learn to recognize what constitutes pertinent material and support for ideas. They will be able to orient themselves, develop their own thoughts integrating materials studied on their own, and will not have to rely on uncritically absorbed foreign thoughts. In addition, a clear definition of academic honesty, well communicated, will through orientation lead to increased quality and decrease in potential "stealing" of ideas. Proactive information will replace correctional tools such as "academic integrity seminars"(McCabe/Pavela) reserved for offenders.

In order to achieve the objective, instructional sessions augmented with web guides to philosophy and general research resources were developed. The web guides had the following components: an overview of the research process; reference works (both print and electronic); how to locate appropriate books, journal articles, and internet sites; citation styles; evaluating internet sites; plagiarism; sources for free primary texts in philosophy. The availability of translations of classic philosophical works by authors such as Plato and Voltaire on the web made it feasible for students to follow the same reading (same translation) on computers in smart classrooms, allowing for a training in close reading (Philosophy 101 and 102).

Individual papers and electronically submitted essays from past and present classes (which included bibliographies) were evaluated. Overall class comprehension was assessed using a web version of "Jeopardy" created specifically for the class. In this "fun" part of the assessment, students were in groups competing against each other in locating resources and in recognizing the necessary tools to achieve their respective research goals. The Jeopardy review session was used by both students and faculty to informally gauge the student's grasp of the

material. Judging from the number of students participating actively (last class: only 3 out of 42 did not participate) the "Jeopardy" element of orientation can even become enjoyable. Since this form of Jeopardy was made available on the web, the students were also able to use it for review. Students already familiar with the library benefited from the refresher class.

Content and form of the assigned papers *"Can Machines Think*?" and *"Ethics Dialogues"* have shown significant growth in the quality and utilization of relevant materials. The best papers have been accepted at conferences and have won awards. The module was developed for *Introduction to Philosophy* and *Ethics/Environmental Ethics* classes; several faculty members have utilized modules from the experiment for their classes.

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