



Electronic MCQs with no Right-or-Wrong Answers as a Means for Developing Dialogic Thinking

Author: George MacDonald Ross, Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds

Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 2040-3674

ISSN-L:

Volume: 8

Number: 3

[Return to vol. 8 no. 3 index page](#)

1. Introduction

Humanities disciplines are under pressure to make more use of electronic teaching aids. There has been resistance to using electronic multiple choice questionnaires (MCQs), on the very good grounds that they give students the inappropriate message that there are right-or-wrong answers to issues in the humanities, and that learning is about memorising these answers. However, it is possible to use a kind of MCQ for training students how to think like a philosopher, even though it cannot be used for summative assessment. I shall demonstrate an MCQ I use in a module on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which encourages students to explore different possible interpretations of a key passage, and reasons for and against the interpretation being a good one. The method can also be used for evaluating whether the doctrine or argument as so interpreted is philosophically sound or not. The idea is that if students get into the habit of thinking about the text in this way as they read, they will be thinking in the same way as a professional historian of philosophy.

This thinking is essentially dialogic, and I first need to explain why the dialogue form is appropriate for student assessments, since some philosophy teachers prohibit students from writing dialogues.

2. My use of the dialogue form in teaching¹

I have always told my students that I have an utterly liberal approach to the form their written work should take. The standard essay is only one of many ways in which ideas can be conveyed, and it is largely confined to academia. An increasing number of university entrants have never written an essay before (especially those with technical and scientific qualifications), and very few will ever write any essays again after graduating. The nearest equivalents are journal articles for the tiny minority of graduates who become professional academics, and reports or opinion pieces written by journalists. And even in these two cases, the accepted conventions are significantly different from those that prevail in the assessment of student essays. So this raises a serious question as to why academics persist in requiring students to write essays, when this particular skill is most unlikely to be relevant to their future careers.

I hate to say this, but I genuinely believe that the majority of students are even more conservative in their attitudes to teaching methods than academics. This is because they have mostly been restricted to a narrow range of teaching methods at school, in which they absorb what their teachers tell them in class, and what they read in their textbooks, and then they regurgitate what they have learned in traditional essays. The ones who are most successful at this are the ones who are admitted to university, and they have problems adjusting to the UK ideal (enshrined in the QAA's qualifications frameworks) that university graduates have been educated to become autonomous, critical thinkers.

What is, or should be, true of all disciplines is especially true of philosophy. Philosophy is nothing if not focussed on independent thinking and debate, and it is scandalous if, as sometimes happens, students can get good marks for merely repeating what they have been told in lectures or read in textbooks. Any technique which helps and requires students to think for themselves is preferable to ones that do not, however hallowed by tradition.

In what follows, I base what I say on my experience of requiring students to write at least one essay in dialogue form in a final-year module on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. I make it absolutely clear to the students that they are being assessed on their ability to give reasons for interpreting the text one way rather than another, and for their evaluation of the text as so interpreted. Although this is a specialised field, the reasons for using the dialogue form are generalisable to any discipline where students are expected to think independently about contested issues.

Although it is now very rare for professional philosophers to write in dialogue form, it was much more common in the past. For example, Plato, Abelard, Hobbes, Leibniz, Berkeley, and Hume all published dialogues. Indeed, Plato was the first philosopher to write in prose (previous philosophers wrote in verse), and he chose the dialogue form because it more closely imitated the debating style of his master Socrates than a discursive treatise would.

Plato said that thinking is 'the soul's silent inner dialogue with itself' (Sophist 263e). This is an excellent way of expressing what goes on in our heads when we are trying to work out how a difficult passage in a philosophical text is to be interpreted, or to decide whether it is right or wrong. 'Does it mean this or does it mean that? It can't mean this, because . . . , so it must mean that; and another reason for interpreting it that way is . . . ' - and so on. If the purpose of student writing is for them to demonstrate their ability to think and reason for themselves, it is much more natural for them to write in dialogue form, which mimics the to and fro of actual thinking.

Using continuous prose, it is in fact quite difficult to write a sustained argument pursuing a contested issue in depth, with objections, replies to objections, replies to replies, and so on. You are forced to use awkward expressions like 'On the other hand, it could be said against this reply that . . . ', whereas such circumlocutions can be omitted entirely in a dialogue.

Not only is the dialogue form more natural for philosophical debate, but it also has psychological advantages which should help students write more imaginatively and logically.

First, if you have struggled to interpret a difficult text, and finally convinced yourself of the correctness of a particular interpretation, it is difficult to step back, and give arguments for an interpretation you have rejected. This is especially

the case when one of the reasons for accepting a particular interpretation is that it is a plausible thing to say in the context. You have come to empathise with that position, and it is hard to think of, let alone argue in favour of alternatives. Writing in dialogue means that you can imagine a character who is likely to disagree with the position you have come to, and speculate as to the sort of objections they might raise. For example, Kant rejects any distinction between the world as we experience it, and the world as described by scientists. So I suggest to students that they should write a dialogue between a Kantian and a modern scientist, and think of the sort of reasons a scientist would give for maintaining that reality is very different from how we experience it.

Second, some students find it hard to write things they disagree with. When writing a discursive essay, everything you write is in your own voice, so to speak, and there is a sort of contradiction in asserting something you don't believe. When writing in dialogue, on the other hand, you distance yourself from what is said, because it is put in the mouth of someone other than yourself. It is much easier to represent an opponent of your position as saying something you disagree with, and which you will then argue against. Despite this, some students insist on making things difficult for themselves. One student heroically had a dialogue between herself and her mother, with her mother giving reasons against her positions.

Third, when writing discursively, students tend to give reasons in favour of what they believe in, and fail to consider objections, let alone replies to objections. I tell them that good philosophical debate does not consist in point-scoring followed by a defensive reply (as tends to happen in the House of Commons, for example), but is more like a long rally in tennis. It is much easier to do this in dialogue form, where the rule of the game is that each little speech is followed by another, which takes up what was said and answers the points made. This process can continue indefinitely, going deeper and deeper into the topic at issue.

One worry that students often express is that, if they are expected to pursue points in depth, they simply won't have the space to cover everything. I tell them that if they have a conflict between depth and breadth, they should choose depth every time. The purpose of philosophy essays is not for students to demonstrate that they know everything about the topic, but to demonstrate their reasoning skills. It is enough for them to consider just one point, but to do so in depth. They can cover their backs by saying things like: 'The following points could be made on this topic: A, B, C, D . . . In this essay, I shall confine myself to A.'

A valuable side-effect of writing in dialogue form is that it is virtually plagiarism-proof. There are no relevant dialogues on the Internet; nor is there anything written in such a way that it would be easily convertible into a successful dialogue. Of course, students can still borrow ideas without acknowledgment-but it is only words that can be plagiarised, not ideas.

I have required students to write dialogues for a number of years now. They all find it challenging, partly because they have never done it before, but mainly because it forces them to use their imagination and to think for themselves. Some just can't do it-in the worst cases they write a conventional essay, and apportion alternate paragraphs to 'Person A' and 'Person B'. Others manage to write quite presentable dialogues, but without taking enough advantage of the form to generate an in-depth philosophical debate. However, a substantial minority find their thinking transformed by the experience, and go on to use the dialogue form whenever they are allowed. The successes more than justify the practice, and I suspect that students would get more out of it if they were required to write dialogues by more of their teachers, and at an earlier stage.

3. How the MCQ helps to develop dialogic thinking

The conclusion of the previous section brings out a weakness in my approach. While I have plenty of evidence that requiring students to write in dialogue form can have considerable educational benefits, it only works for a minority of students, because it requires skills in which they have had no previous training. If I had the time, I could give additional classes on writing in dialogue form, and set exercises which I would mark and return to students with comments. Merely giving advice in the module handbook and in a brief one-to-one tutorial (which I do) is insufficient.

But I simply do not have the time, and I doubt that any other philosophy teachers have the time either.

I have been given a grant by my university to develop an electronic tool which should help students to acquire the skill of dialogic thinking without any teacher intervention. It is specific to students studying Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but the idea can be applied to any text where interpretation and evaluation are contested.

For many years I have given students historical texts in a digital form which is easier for them to work from than in hard copy. Indeed, I believe it should be an absolute requirement that electronic media should be used only if there is an educational advantage to the student. Too often, academics merely comply with managerial requirements that VLEs should be used in teaching, and produce 'shovelware' by digitising old hard-copy handouts, shovelling them into the VLE, and expecting students to shovel them out again in hard copy at great expense to themselves in time and money. In my view, this is a wholly immoral and unprofessional practice which should be outlawed.

Students cannot be expected to cope with difficult historical texts unless they are provided with some sort of a running commentary. However, it is difficult for students to relate a running commentary provided by their teacher to a published text if both are in hard copy. I have developed a technique in which I give students a user-friendly translation of relevant texts in an upper frame, and an interlinked running commentary in a lower frame. Clicking on a paragraph number in the text brings up the commentary, and clicking on a paragraph number in the commentary brings up the text. Provided that students are advised how they can maximise the legibility of on-screen texts, their experience of reading on-line should be superior to reading in hard copy. They can also be provided with the advantage of immediate access to on-line dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and any other links or re-usable learning objects their teacher provides.

However, one of the *dis*advantages for students of working on line is that they tend to be rather passive readers, since most of them have never been taught how to think actively while reading. Generally they have been given textbooks and other materials deliberately written so as to be as easily comprehensible as possible. And the more passive the students are, the more the act of reading becomes boring, and tiring on the eyes. The type of MCQ I have devised is intended not only to give them something active to do while they are reading, but to give them a concrete example of the sort of thinking they ought to be engaged in all the time while reading a difficult text. Once they have acquired the right reading skills and habits, they should be thinking dialogically as they read, just like an experienced historian of philosophy.

The MCQ works as follows. It is linked to an important but ambiguous passage in the text. I have set it up in frames, so that the passage referred to remains in the upper frame all the time. In the lower frame there is a set of very short web pages, with interlinks. These pages are at three distinct levels. At the top level, there is a list of possible interpretations of the passage. The student clicks on one of these interpretations, and is then given a second-level page, with a number of reasons for and against that interpretation. Finally, clicking on one of these reasons will bring up a third-level page, in which I comment on the validity or otherwise of that reason. They then click on a link back to the previous page, and select a different reason, and so on till they have covered all the reasons. After that, they can follow a link back to the top page, and select a different interpretation.

I think it is significant that the interpretations and reasons can be chosen in any order, since this reflects the multi-faceted nature of dialogic thinking in the mind of an experienced reader. If the passage is indeed ambiguous, then the student should come away with an understanding that there may be no definitive answer to the question of what the author intended, and that there can be a wide range of reasons, some better than others, for preferring one interpretation to another. This is the polar opposite of the impression they get if they take a traditional MCQ, in which every possible answer is treated as either absolutely correct, or absolutely wrong.

Finally, if a student wants to write out their thinking, it is far easier for them to do this in the form of a dialogue than in a discursive essay. Different characters can support different interpretations, giving various reasons in favour of them; and other characters can give reasons against the interpretations they do not support. Exactly the same goes for

arguments for and against the philosophical position as so interpreted. An MCQ can be used to illustrate the various pros and cons, and again, the dialogue form is the most suitable for turning a mental debate into a written one.

In conclusion, the dialogue form is ideal for presenting a philosophical debate, and the type of MCQ I have devised is a cost-effective way of training students to think dialogically. A sample MCQ on Kant's Copernican revolution is accessible at <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/modules/kantmcq/p19/p19frame.html>.

Endnotes

1. This whole of this section is to be published as 'Why students should write dialogues' in Credit where credit's due: Newsletter of the Fellowships Scheme for staff and educational developers, 2008.

[Return to vol. 8 no. 3 index page](#)

Created on: April 2nd 2009

Updated on: August 19th 2010