

FREE WILL IN A PHILOSOPHY CLASSROOM: HOW CHOICE CAN DRIVE  
ENGAGEMENT IN YEAR 12 BOYS

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**Abstract**

The teaching of philosophy in an examined context can be didactic, with teachers often preferring to walk students through complex and sometimes counterintuitive philosophical concepts step by step. This method may come at a high cost, however, leaving those students underdeveloped in terms of skills they subsequently need at university, notably the ability to find learning approaches that allow for them to be self-sufficient in their study. In this project, I aimed to see whether, through a carefully structured framework, allowing Year 12 boys to design their own learning pathways impacted their ability to engage independently with philosophical concepts. I discovered that whilst some students were hesitant about self-directed learning, many left the action with a much clearer idea of how they wanted to learn and a greater sense of agency over their learning.

**Introduction**

The 2019-20 IBSC action research theme, *Developing Agency: Boy Voice and Choice*, offered me a welcome chance to explore a tension in my professional practice I had been concerned about for some time. The study of philosophy is, ostensibly, about free thinking; it should encourage students to think independently and critically about important topics without imposing artificial limits on their creativity. However, in a UK context, the presence and importance of A Level examinations for progression into Higher Education can mean that this natural impulse of the discipline is often subordinate to the need to progress through a syllabus. In short, consolidation often takes precedence over exploration. In my experience, this often means that students lack a sense of agency in their study of philosophy, both in terms of how they learn and what they learn. Conversely, the study of the subject at universities is typically highly student-driven, with students expected to read, understand, and write on philosophy before getting the input of a lecturer or professor. This transition, I have always assumed, must be particularly difficult for boys whose prior educational context is a traditional, regimented boarding school such as mine, which has clear, unbendable rules for how and when one studies. The goal of this action research project was therefore to try and give boys, possibly for the first time, real agency and freedom over how they chose to learn philosophy, and what learning pathways they chose to invest their time in. I

hoped that by giving them both voice and choice in their own learning, boys would be able to engage independently with philosophy and have greater agency in their learning.

### **Research Question**

*How does allowing Year 12 boys to design their learning pathways impact their ability to engage independently with philosophical concepts?*

### **Action Research Methodology**

Action research is a “systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, councillors or others with a vested interest in a teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information on how their schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn” (Mertler, 2017, p. 4). Mertler’s idea of triangulation, which ensures academic credibility by basing findings on the convergence of data from different sources, made action research a particularly useful methodology for me in the context of the IBSC’s chosen theme of “voice and choice,” as it allowed me to synthesise the boys thoughts with my own. Action research allowed the participants to be “co-creators” of the research, which was important; as they interacted with a broad range of resources the boys’ reflections on different learning pathways were used in conjunction with my own field notes and observations. Action research’s focus predominantly on qualitative data allowed for precise feedback that was actionable in ongoing teaching and learning.

### **Literature Review**

Whilst there is a wealth of literature attending to the philosophy of education more broadly, there is little scholarly literature dealing with teaching philosophies for the teaching of philosophy. The limited literature that explicitly invokes philosophy in an educational context delineates two distinct understandings of philosophy education.

The first understanding sees the goal of philosophy as being to equip students with a definable set of skills, including, but not limited to, critical thinking, empathy, and verbal/non-verbal reasoning, which are transferable across a range of contexts. In this approach, “students drive the discussion and raise their own questions without regard for a conceptual framework arising from the history of philosophy” (Norris, 2015, p. 66).

The second understanding sees philosophy as a defined academic discipline, “with a chronology of thinkers and ideas [examining] ... how philosophers influenced and responded to one another. In other words, philosophy construed as the history of philosophy” (Norris, 2015, p. 67). One of the most successful examples of the former approach is Lipman’s Philosophy for Children, or ‘P4C’ (Lipman et

al., 1980). The methodology of P4C involves creating a “community of inquiry” in which students have agency over their own learning, creating their own philosophical questions from an abstract stimulus. Whilst academic studies on this initiative’s success in a UK context are difficult to come by, a 2006 study carried out on 100 elementary school students during two academic years showed that “teaching philosophy for children led to significant changes in verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills among the students and teachers used twice as many open-answer questions” (Marashi et al., 2008, p. 27).

The Lipman approach does not have universal support, however. Norris (2015) notes that many university lecturers see flaws in a skills-focused teaching model, which they say creates “precocious students with little awareness of past thinking” (p. 15). Further, Ruitenberg (2014) notes that learning the history of philosophy can help promote humility; the benefit of “combining learning to think with what others have thought is that it fosters the intellectual virtue of humility and an understanding that thinking has a tradition” (p. 86).

Philosophy as examined in an A Level curriculum, sits as an uneasy middle ground within this knowledge versus skills debate. Recent reforms to A-Level curriculums in the UK have sought to re-emphasise that curriculums should be knowledge-rich, with recent updates from the school inspectorate emphasising that deep knowledge is a prerequisite for skill development (Spielman, 2018). For some students it is clear that the pressure of summative examination ensures philosophy is not an exercise in critical thinking but instead a slavish regurgitation of what “other people have said” (Norris, 2015, p. 67). It was this deferential attitude to philosophy that horrified Emmanuel Kant (1992), who emphasised how important it was “not to learn philosophy—but rather to learn to philosophize, otherwise it remains only imitation—to attain it oneself through exercise of the understanding, that is what matters” (p. 436). On the other hand, success at the top end of the A Level does require the critical thinking and verbal reasoning skills that skills based approaches to philosophy foreground. There is, therefore, a creative tension between guiding students through a prescriptive examined course and encouraging them to think independently and critically.

My research investigated whether giving students agency and choice over their learning pathways increased their ability to think critically and independently. As Deed et al. (2014) note, the defining feature of personalised learning is “the student imprinting their preferences on the formal educational process” (p. 67). This teaching method is in direct contrast with the more traditional model of delivery in an A Level course in which time and space is strictly controlled, with heavy levels of teacher regulation and hierarchical knowledge transmission. Agency is especially desirable within a time pressurised environment because it shifts the focus of students back onto process as opposed to product (Frost & Connolly, 2015). This shift is important in an educational culture like A Level study, where students are

“the objects of assessment with teachers or external testing bodies controlling the field of evaluation and judgement” (Adie et al., 2018, p. 1).

There are numerous potential benefits to factoring agency into the design of a learning environment. Choice, ownership, and voice through authentic learning opportunities have the ability to positively influence learning outcomes and student perceptions of learning (Thibodeaux et al., 2019). Furthermore, developing students’ self-regulatory and metacognitive abilities has proven to be one of the most significant influences on student learning and academic success (Bingham et al., 2010; Black & William, 2009; Braund & DeLuca, 2018; Hudesman et al., 2013). There is also research to suggest that factoring agency into a learning environment can be particularly beneficial to boys. As Deed and Campbell (2007) have argued, boys’ perceptions “about being in control of learning [can be] a key influence in their academic engagement” especially when such approaches are “complimented by strategies that address the student’s limited ideas about learning” (p.16).

There is a broad range of strategies that has been shown to support personalised learning and student agency. These strategies include “flexible use of time and space, social reforming of the classroom as a community space, reflexive interactions between teacher-student and student-student within which they make choices and experiment with the consequences of those decisions” (Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012, p. 67). In addition, Lindgren and McDaniel identify several instructive prerequisites for success:

- Teachers and students need to “regularly identify and discuss the reasoning for pedagogical choices relating to the use of open classroom spaces and personalised learning strategies” (p. 72).
- Teachers should “provide cognitive and metacognitive prompts to frame students’ planning, monitoring, and reflection processes. Success criteria, despite autonomy, for a particular task, do need to be modelled” (p.72).
- Teachers should co-regulate in order to ensure there is efficiency and effectiveness in students’ investment in autonomy because the extent of student agency can be dependent on students’ “capacity to take responsibility for their own learning, in order to be adaptive problem solvers and researchers” (p.74).

I used these guidelines to design the basic framework of my research action.

### **Research Context**

Harrow School is an independent all boys’ boarding school in Middlesex, North West London, England. The school describes itself as “a modern school in a historical setting” - an apt description for a school that is nearly five hundred years old. There are just over eight hundred boys at the school, spread over 12

different boarding houses. It is a truly multicultural school, with pupils arriving at Harrow from a diverse range of traditions, cultures, and backgrounds.

My 12 research participants were 16 to 17 year-old boys who had just embarked on an A-Level course in Philosophy and Ethics. I chose this group of participants because they were at an important nexus in their educational journey through the subject, needing to combine increased demands on them to learn detailed philosophical concepts with the learning of new critical thinking skills. The school is also typically very regimented and structured in its approach to learning in lower years; however, boys in the Lower 6th were allowed to learn with more freedom, creating the ideal space for an action concerning voice and choice.

I sought all the necessary permissions for the boys to participate in this action research. I ensured that no names were used during data collection and the reporting of my research and that involvement in the project remained entirely voluntary.

### **The Action**

Instead of teaching a set of structured, sequenced lessons, I began the action by teaching one lesson outlining the conceptual framework of the new topic under study. I then presented the boys with a broad range of differentiated lesson activities including excerpts from primary texts, video and audio lectures, game and situation-based learning activities, reading comprehension activities, and extended writing activities.

The boys had freedom to choose between the different stimuli over a two to three week period or suggest further methods via which they would rather pursue the subject under study. They were given only two requirements. Firstly, at the end of each lesson, they had to record a summary of what they had learnt and offer short reflections on whether they felt the approach that they chose was conducive to their learning, explaining why, when possible. Secondly, they had to keep a traffic light record of how secure they felt in their learning of each discrete aspect of the syllabus. I imposed these limited stipulations to give the boys cognitive and metacognitive prompts to structure their self-directed learning.

The action plan also allowed students to structure their own homework deadlines; the boys not only chose when they wanted to be assessed on their work but they could also write their own questions around areas of the syllabus that interested them most. This component was an important aspect of the action because it gave the boys agency over how and when they were assessed - an unavoidable but often stressful juncture in the learning pathway. In this way, the parameters for the action and a code of conduct were drawn up and agreed upon collaboratively before the action began, with the boys involved in deciding what success would look like but also what steps would be appropriate if they didn't respond well to the increased autonomy.

## **Data Collection**

Prior to, during, and after my three-week action, I collected data from the boys using a range of different methods in line with Mertler's (2017) idea of polyangulation, ensuring academic credibility by basing findings on the convergence of data from different sources.

Data collection occurred in two discrete ways: at predefined points during the action and as a process of continual reflection on behalf of both the boys and me. The fixed data collection points consisted of surveys conducted at the beginning and the end of the action, complemented by semi-structured interviews. The initial survey consisted of a questionnaire completed by the boys on their perceptions of how they had engaged with philosophy over the first half term of their Lower Sixth year. I devised the questionnaire to highlight to what extent the boys felt they were already able to engage independently with philosophical concepts and to what extent they knew and were able to choose the strategies they felt best enabled them to do so. The semi-structured interviews complemented the surveys by giving boys a more diffuse space in which to share their thoughts on philosophy, with a series of open questions structured around engagement with philosophy as a stimulus.

I asked the same baseline questions in an exit survey in order to gather information on whether the intervention had altered the boys' perceptions of their ability to engage independently. In order to see whether autonomy had enabled them to be reflective about their working methods, I also included exit survey questions that asked the boys to assess whether they thought any approaches to learning worked particularly well for them and why. The action ran over a three-week period that included four lessons each week, allowing plenty of time for rich data gathering. During this time, I kept an informal log of thoughts about the perceived success of the learning pathways, often noting comments made informally by the boys in and out of lesson time. These observations, reviewed weekly with my mentor, were used primarily for the purpose of recording the agency of the students during the process as they reflected on the active choices students were making when choosing their own learning pathways.

I also asked the boys to keep a record of their learning pathway choices and to evaluate their success in said choice on a lesson-by-lesson basis. Whilst this was partly to introduce a metacognitive dimension to the students learning process, a key subset of successful agency, it also provided useful qualitative data and ongoing opportunities for the boys to use their voices, with wider significance for my teaching praxis. Consistent collection of data also allowed me to continuously refine the action to ensure learning was not compromised.

## **Data Analysis**

I began analysis by reviewing my specific observations, noting emerging patterns and themes, and using coding methods to categorise schemes. Each boy was given an email-generated numerical code so their information was anonymous but could still be compared between surveys. For the transcribed interviews and pupil reflection logs, I carefully scrutinised and collated the information on a week-by-week basis to highlight any incremental commonality or divergence between participants. This was particularly important as boys began to combine and review bespoke learning pathways. I highlighted any dramatic change in view as a flag for further analysis. When participant data did not match the reflections in my field notes, this merited further observation. The student self-reflections also offered opportunities for prioritising student voice and reflection on choice.

## **Discussion of Results**

Comparing the data collected from the pre- and post-project questionnaires demonstrated a generally positive reaction towards the action. More boys expressed confidence that they were responsible for their own learning, whilst in their written feedback post-action, many boys identified independent learning strategies they would use before asking a teacher. This was particularly interesting because, though a large majority of the boys (11 out of 12) stated that they already felt somewhat able to engage with the subject independently prior the action, they were reticent to identify how they could or would do so. The post-action questionnaire, by contrast, was distinctive in the specificity of the student's responses as to how they prefer to learn independently. Boys also reported that they enjoyed studying philosophy more during the action, with ten boys saying they enjoyed the subject "very much", compared to seven beforehand. There was also a marked increase in the number of boys who felt they knew which learning strategies worked best for them: prior to the action, seven felt somewhat or very confident, whereas after the action, 11 felt somewhat or very confident.

After comparing the responses of the boys in the pre- and post- action survey, I highlighted a number of areas for further discussion:

### **Increased Choice Allows for Engagement on Boys Own Terms**

One of the aims of the action was to improve boys' ability to engage independently with philosophy by allowing them to choose between differentiated learning pathways. That a "one size fits all" approach was hampering effective engagement was clear from the pre-action survey. When asked about their favoured strategies for accessing material, one boy complained that "discussion is too advanced – I would rather spend more time having the basics explained by the teacher," whilst another commented, "not everything

needs teaching – I would prefer to move quicker through early ideas.” Similarly, one boy favoured “more reading, with group discussion coming after I’ve had a go myself,” whilst another boy noted “less reading, I’d rather have things explained to me.” As the action progressed, it was clear from the boys’ exit tickets that choosing their own pathways was constructive in highlighting what approaches worked best. Tracing a particular boy’s responses through weeks two and three of the action highlighted this well. In week two, he commented “the textbook was hard to understand, but the YouTube lecture clarified what I didn’t get - next week I will change the order.” In the exit survey, many boys commented favourably on how increased choice allowed them to engage, with one boy commenting, “even though it is more relaxed it has led to a greater amount of knowledge being learned.”

Frequently in survey responses the boys positively contrasted the project action against their day-to-day school experience. One boy commented that the action “helped him to relax and focus rather than look for distractions [he] might in other lessons ... because it was [his] choice.” Five boys commented that they enjoyed how the action allowed them to work at their “own pace,” with one adding that this was “refreshing.” One boy even described it as a “bold leap in learning attitudes!” The contrast with the boys’ usual routine was most apparent in the provision for boys to choose their own homework deadlines, which seven boys commented favourably upon,; one commenting, “I like working when it feels right for me and not worrying about the end of the weekend.”

### **Hesitancy to Embrace Self-Directed Learning**

Whilst most boys found the action positive in allowing them to choose how they accessed material, this attitude was not universal. One student of the twelve noted that his biggest challenge of the term was “keeping focused on work” with the renewed freedom, noting in the post-action questionnaire that he preferred the “old [more structured] learning methods.” Despite provision being made for structured group work at discrete intervals, another boy noted that the approach had the potential to leave him “isolated” from other students, even though it did “make him much more independent.”

Boys conveyed some of their anxieties in their exit tickets. One boy said that without a strict lesson structure, “it took a while to get to grips as to whether [they’d] studied the topic in enough detail or not,” with another boy also perceptively noting that, “it might not work as well for all the topics we study.” This may be something that, in a longer study would improve, but it was notable how uncomfortable some boys initially felt with assessing their own progress. This was notable in the week one self-reflection tickets, with many boys responding “unsure” to the question of how successful their chosen learning pathway(s) had been. These responses may have something to do with boys’ reflection that their own pace of work was in contrast to their usual school routine, making the process of managing their time without tight deadlines and micro-structures unfamiliar.

## **Increased Ability to Engage Independently and Verbalise Philosophical Concepts**

One of the hardest things to measure in the study was the extent to which boys were increasingly able to *engage independently* with philosophical pathways; however, there were some signs that the action may have aided in this outcome. My field notes reflect that as the action persisted, boys did not only rely on the diversified learning pathways provided. On a number of occasions, they also suggested and shared resources they had sourced or created themselves. The contrast between entry and exit surveys also revealed some more tacit indicators of increased engagement. When asked what the hardest thing they had studied in the previous half term was, answers before the action were almost all generic or process-related (responses included “grasping concepts nobody knows the answer to”; “getting things down on paper”; “difficult concepts”). By the close of the action, these answers became increasingly content-driven. Six boys even listed specific aspects of the syllabus (responses included “preference utilitarianism” or “the hedonic calculus”). This trend of specificity could also be mapped in the boys’ lesson exit tickets. These short reflective surveys asked them to assess the strategies they had used each lesson and why, and, as a general trend, they became increasingly detailed. By week three and in the post-action survey, boys were also frequently sequencing pathways. For example, one boy said, “I like to read the textbook first then watch a YouTube video to check my understanding.” On the whole, the boys were also very positive about the action in their exit feedback. One boy commented, “I feel more in control of my learning in philosophy than ever before,” and another boy described it more simply as “very useful.”

## **Conclusions**

This action research project has made clear to me that it is possible in an examined Philosophy syllabus to give students more choice over their own learning, and indeed, that by encouraging this choice, many students will feel an increased sense of agency. The boys embraced this new initiative with commitment and excitement, and since the conclusion of my project, I have observed a new willingness in them to work independently and find their own routes through difficult subject content.

Going forward, I intend to build more choice into my teaching style as, and where, the syllabus allows. However, the hesitancy of some boys to embrace self-directed learning, likely in part because of the institutional context in which they have been educated, does mean that a careful structure must be in place in order to support students in such a process. This is as identified by Lindgren and McDaniel (2017); it is vitally important to frame student agency with cognitive and metacognitive prompts if it is to be successful. To augment my process, I intend to invest more time in modelling and teaching study skills to students, helping them to know how and where they can find the resources to be independent. I will also make adjustments to methods of assessment in order to make the boys co-creators of the process. By making these changes, I hope to ensure that all boys can access difficult philosophical concepts as

engaged and independent learners. I also hope that in a broader department and school context, my findings reflect positively that boys are keen to embrace independent learning and gain a sense of agency over their learning journey.

### **Reflection**

My involvement with the IBSC over the past year through the action research project has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience and a hugely rewarding piece of professional development. As I write this reflection in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, public examinations have been cancelled and schools in the United Kingdom are being reminded of the paucity of a paper qualification as a way of quantifying an education. With schools facing prolonged closures, there is also a renewed focus on students as independent learners who understand how to navigate new challenges and feel a sense of empowerment and agency over their own learning. I have been very lucky to get this opportunity to reflect on student agency, voice and choice this year and now feel far better equipped to help my students in a difficult time, having carved out this space to develop my professional practice. I have also taken a huge amount from working with so many engaging, inspiring and internationally-based colleagues for which I would like to thank all my friends in “Team Laura.” And finally of course, I’d like to thank our Team Advisor Laura Sabo, for all her tireless enthusiasm and efforts over the course of the past year.

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