

# How to Digitally Coauthor Articles In Philosophy Class

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A group assignment activity for philosophy students at the undergraduate level, which can be applied in tandem with existing curricula. Consists of a way to standardise the work of each individual student such that each student's contributions to the group assignment fits in seamlessly with the other team members' contributions, and a way to apply the system to the specific course material being assessed.

Published June 30, 2019. Available at <https://thephilosophersmeme.com/articles/how-to-digitally-coauthor-articles-in-philosophy-class/>.

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# Introduction

In this design document, I present a group assignment activity for philosophy students at the undergraduate level, which can be applied in tandem with existing curricula. The design consists of a way to standardise the work of each individual student such that each student's contributions to the group assignment fits in seamlessly with the other team members' contributions, and a way to apply the system to the specific course material being assessed. In the activity, students form a team of 3 to 5 members to co-author an essay and contribute to a pool of resources shared among the entire class. The shared pool of resources is built using a combination of a library for citation materials (using Zotero), initially seeded with assigned readings which will be discussed online using a collaborative discussion app (using a private NowComment group). Each student works on just a single premise for the entire duration of the project, developing the premise by adding supporting evidence and developing the argument. They must work together in order to make sure that there are no contradictions between any of the premises developed by the team, as well as cooperating with other teams in order to improve the work of the entire class in order to defeat the tutor's own counterarguments.

In the typical philosophy classroom setting, most assignments consist of written work, namely the essay. Essay writing is a private activity. Taking feedback from the tutor on the draft of a short assignment essay is not generally encouraged, and even in cases of a supervised thesis, the work of writing is ultimately up to the individual student. Philosophy students can often complete their degree without any experience in group work of any kind.

It is unclear that there is a pressing need for training in collaborative work for philosophers. Depending on the view of what philosophy is and how it is supposed to be done, this individualistic approach may be acceptable. Collaboration in philosophy may be inherently less beneficial to the participants and less scalable compared to the sciences, in which the cumulative benefit of replicative study can allow for collaboration at a distance in both time and place. It may well be that the current lack of demand for collaborative learning in philosophy reflects the lack of professional demand for collaborative skills in the field.

According to a dataset collected by Joshua Knobe (2015)<sup>[1]</sup> on the citation count of the most cited articles published in the top 20 philosophy journals between 2009 and 2013, 108 of the 394 sampled articles had more than one author. According to a list collected by Brian Weatherson (2013),<sup>[2]</sup> 11 of 34 most cited articles between 1993 and 2013 had more than one author. While these statistics do not support even a correlation between coauthorship and citation count for articles in general, let alone a causal link between the number of authors and the number of citations, it does support the case for collaboration as a viable strategy for academic research in philosophy. Despite the associated costs of introducing a new method of learning, namely resistance against group work from students, the various benefits (Laal & Ghodsi, 2011)<sup>[3]</sup> of collaborative learning and the learning activities only available to a team of students justify the extra work. Digital methods can greatly reduce the workload on behalf of the educator and add another practical dimension to the work that will benefit the students. Furthermore, philosophy presents unique advantages to other disciplines in that arguments can be formalised in such a way that they are interoperable within the same logical system.

# Activity Design

## Instructions for the Tutor

The activity consists of students working in teams of three to five on an argument with two to four premises and a conclusion in order to develop it through collaboration and iteration. The argument structure is provided by the tutor in advance, and varies from team to team. At the end of each week, the students review the other teams' progress and provide feedback and counterarguments using their own material and resource pool.

The goal of the activity is to craft a well supported and thought out argument through iteration (namely, testing and modifying the argument accordingly). By the end of the activity, each student will have developed a part of the assigned argument which they are deeply familiar with. To prepare, the tutor performs the following tasks:

1. Write a short essay (the opposition essay), which the students will be arguing against.
2. Divide the students into teams of three to five members.
3. Create a Zotero group for the class.
4. Create a NowComment group for the class.
5. Assign each team an argument template in the form of premises and a conclusion.
6. Explain the assignment in detail using the Assignment Instructions below.

## Assignment Instructions

In this assignment, you will co-author an essay with your teammates and contribute to a resource library together with the whole class. Your task is to develop an argument with your teammates in order to defeat the counterposition that your lecturer will develop. You will also have the opportunity to strengthen the argument based on weekly feedback from students in the other teams.

Discuss among your team which roles each person should play, and elect a team leader who will be responsible for communicating with the lecturer and guiding the overall writing process. Decide on an argument using the template below, such that the conclusion follows from the premises. Decide which of the five parts each team member will be responsible for, and write a section of the essay, using the

previous premise as its first sentence (except in the case of P1). Discuss with your team how your section connects with their own, using a NowComment thread.

Argument Template:

- P1. [This fundamental premise will be decided in a class discussion.]
- P2. [This premise should follow from P1]
- P3. [This premise should follow from P2]
- P4. [This premise should follow from P3]
- C. [This conclusion should be opposed to the opposition essay provided by the lecturer.]

At the end of the week, the team leader must upload a PDF of the team's essay to LEARN. Only the team leader should upload the assignment (make sure that everyone's names are on the assignment!).

On the following week, read the other teams' essays which the lecturer will add to the Zotero library. Provide useful feedback through NowComment, and suggest citations on Zotero. Your lecturer will also provide feedback in the form of counterarguments, and update the opposition essay accordingly.

Rewrite your essay based on the feedback you received, and report the modifications in the form of a new argument (in the same form as the original, based on the template) and a brief commentary. Cite any feedback received which was reflected in the new version.

Rules:

- Each member of the team is responsible for one section of the essay, corresponding to one part of the argument.
- Each section of the essay should be between 200 and 300 words in length.
- You may only use materials included in the shared resource library. If it is not already included in the library, simply add the citation.
- You will be marked according to four evenly weighted criteria:
  - **Your contribution to the shared resources** (citations in the Zotero group; annotations on the materials in the NowComment group; feedback on another group's essay; in-class

participation)

- **Your contribution to the overall development process**, as evidenced by the use of the tools provided (note: a major part of the marking criterion is the use of standardised tools and formats) and your team's essay, judged as a whole
- **Your contribution to your own section of the essay**, based on its quality and how well it works with the other parts of the essay
- How well **the whole class** argues against the opposition essay

## Learning Outcomes

The expected learning outcomes of this group assignment are:

- Students will learn how to use digital tools for academic writing
- Students will come to appreciate the value of iterative development
- Students will develop collaborative skills in a team setting
- Students will improve their ability to formalise and analyse arguments
- Students will improve their ability to give and receive feedback

## Logistics

The group assignment is intended for use in a philosophy classroom at the undergraduate level. The assignment is organised in weekly intervals, and can last anywhere from two weeks to the entire duration of the course. At least three students and one tutor is required for the activity, and five students per team is ideal. Basic computer and internet access is necessary. Zotero and NowComment are both free, and support many useful functions that will help students work together across teams.

The more the students learn about the different features of the tools (e.g. the use of tags), the more effective the activity will be. The proportion of the philosophy aspect to the digital humanities aspect can be varied depending on the needs of the course, and the activity instructions provided above is the minimum viable model for introducing the latter into a straight philosophy environment. The skills of the tutor in facilitating the group activities is fairly important to make the assignment work, especially

given that arts students do not handle group assignments well. The tutor should familiarise themselves with the tools beforehand.

## **Grading the Students' Work**

As mentioned in the Assignment Instructions, the marking criteria are: the student's contribution to the shared resources; the student's contribution to the overall development process; the student's contribution to their own section of the essay; and the class's attack on the opposition essay. Each part is evenly weighted.

It should be emphasised that much of what is simply considered part of the writing process is in fact assessed according to another part of the marking schedule. Activities such as gathering and annotating references, writing reading notes, exchanging feedback, editing the draft, should all be completed through the tools provided. Not only does this allow the work to be recognised for credit, it will also teach the students how to produce materials less complete than a full essay that can be used by other team members and classmates.

The assignment is not marked on the basis of the end product alone (namely, the essays and the library), so as to make contributing to a shared pool of resources and a collaborative project feel fair. It is crucial that the focus of the activity is on the process rather than the end product, since the intended learning outcomes are to teach the students the value of working together iteratively. Ideally, the students would come away from the assignment with a sense that they do not need to value their ideas as much as they need to value what they can do with those ideas.

In order to achieve the effects described above, the tutor should exercise some discretion and independent judgment as to what counts as a contribution to the shared resources, and what counts as part of the team's development process, and so on.

## **The Digital Tools**

### **NowComment**

NowComment is a collaborative annotation and discussion app which allows users to discuss a document using threaded comments. Users may highlight a section of the document and start a comment

thread associated with the specific section. It works best with Word files but can also handle PDF files. Although users may also edit the document, the use of versioned documents with comment-based feedback will probably be more appropriate for the activity. It supports multimedia (images, video, audio). It can also be made to work with learning management systems such as Moodle (used by University of Canterbury).

It is wise to explicitly work online discussion into the assignment material in a way that doesn't narrow the task down to a mere checkbox. Students typically do not make use of LMS-native forums without being made to, but readily participate in informal settings such as a Facebook discussion group specific to the course. The Goldilocks Zone of facilitated course discussion must be developed by managing the students' incentives. For example, allowing the students to make free use of the other students' feedback, comments, and notes provides an incentive for the students to read the comment threads. If the students are also made to cite these materials produced by their classmates, and if citations count toward the final mark, it also incentivises students to produce broadly useful material for the other classmates.

The benefit of collaborative annotation may not be immediately apparent to students beyond getting hints about the course material. In order to make the benefit more obvious, it is up to the tutor to incorporate meaningful incentives into the system. For example, the above case might go awry if the students game the system by colluding to cite each other as much as possible. The fault in that case would be entirely with the tutor who designed the system, unless the point was a critique of publishing academics. Furthermore, students can only care so much about grades until they decide that the activity is too demanding, and encouraging a focus on grades over the material at hand is a toxic pattern regardless. The point of grades should be to maximise the minimum level of participation across the board, so that highly engaged students can participate freely to everybody's benefit including their own.

NowComment allows users to add tags to each comment. Deciding on an ontology in advance will make the activity much more useful. A properly designed tagging scheme consists of as few tags as is necessary for the level of granularity required. For instance, a good tagging scheme would probably not include synonyms such as "ethics" and "morality". Whether coming to a consensus on the vocabulary of the tagging scheme is used as part of the activity or not, the principle should be kept in mind. Once the tagging scheme is set up and used actively by the students, they can search for relevant comments by specific tags based on their particular needs. For instance, a student may want to discuss the topic of "foundherentism", and begin not by writing a forum post from scratch but by searching for the tag first,

reading the comments that come up in the search, and then replying to the most relevant discussion. In the case that they are the first to start a discussion about the topic, the tag will later help others interested in the topic find the post.

The usefulness of this tool depends on a high level of participation on behalf of the students. This is difficult to achieve, and understandably so, given the fact that LMS forums are generally reserved for throw-away questions that get locked away from the students themselves once the course is closed. There is no sense that the students are contributing towards a resource that they can even look back on later on. The tutor should therefore make an effort to compile the content that results, and constantly bring it back into the fold of the face to face discussions. The content compiled this way could also be analysed by the tutor to give feedback to the students about the popularity of certain topics, the frequency of certain keywords, and other quantifiable metrics.

Most importantly, the threaded comments should be used to facilitate the constant updating and improvement of the students' work. Beyond postgraduate theses in which the students receive routine feedback from the supervisors, students seldom get to revisit their assignments to improve it once it has been marked. The effect of closely supervised writing could be achieved, at a fraction of the cost in the tutor's time and effort, through a system of back and forth conversation with the student responsible for the writing. This process of conscious rewriting would train the students to learn and think far more deeply about a given topic than the typical churn of essays promotes.

## **Zotero**

Zotero allows users to work together in a group to create libraries of citations together. It supports file attachments and attached comments, although the comment function is far inferior compared to NowComment and best left unused for this activity. Users can sort the citations using collections, tags, and relations. Collections work like hierarchical playlists: they are organised like folders and sub-folders, but adding a citation into more than one of those folders does not duplicate it, as it would a file added into multiple folders. Tags can be anything from type to rating, and can also be assigned colours and priorities, up to nine tags and priority numbers each. Relations link citations together, and is usually reserved for linking book chapters to books or for different versions of the same document. In the activity, it could be used to link different versions and parts of each team's essay together.

The utility of a citation manager will be much more obvious to the students than the collaborative discussion tool. However, it is also much harder to learn compared to NowComment, which requires little more knowledge than how to write a comment and add replies. For the purpose of the activity, frequency of contact with Zotero's various functions should be prioritised. Unless the students become familiar with the tool early on, it will remain a persistent roadblock to activities that they already know how to do, which is at least as frustrating as being forced to work with bad teammates in a poorly designed group assignment. Some introductory exercises throughout the course to keep the students engaged will be useful. For example, quizzes could be designed to include answers accessible only through searching for appropriate tags on Zotero. The more that a given collection is reused for multiple purposes, the more valuable it will become to the students to familiarise themselves with its contents, and therefore with Zotero in general.

Collections provide an effective way of sorting the citations. In the activity, each team should be provided with a collection, under which a collection for each section of the essay and related reference materials can be collected. This means that each student is wholly responsible for at least one collection in the Zotero group as a whole, namely the one which corresponds to the section that they are writing. The aim of collections should not be to develop as expansive a list of papers as possible, but to curate the most relevant material for each student's specific goals.

Zotero could also be used to provide additional dimensions to the activity which reflect the course focus. For instance, a course on aesthetics might include building a library of artworks as part of the assignment, and each team could have its own art curator. A course on ethics might incorporate creating a collection of hypothetical ethical dilemmas written by the students as part of the assignment. Material produced through discussions using NowComment could be added as their own collections, or as related content to the particular article that the discussions happened around.

## **Conclusion**

The two tools described above, used as part of the group assignment activity, lay the foundations for a method of mass collaboration among philosophers. Whereas collaboration at scale is effectively built into the sciences, most work in the humanities is inherently unscalable. Certain scalable activities, such as contributing to a shared library or the enrichment of metadata, are discipline-agnostic and can be

readily adopted by humanists. New digital methods in the humanities are promising in their potential to make scalable what was hitherto unscalable. For instance, macroanalysis (Jockers, 2013)<sup>[4]</sup> and distant reading allow researchers to analyse an indefinite number of texts through the use of computational methods. Whereas the conventional method of close reading would have only allowed a researcher to become deeply familiar with a few hundred texts over their entire career at most, distant reading allows the researcher to analyse hundreds of thousands of texts for patterns.

The value of collaboration at scale in philosophy writing can be understood as a kind of writing intended to promote distant reading. In distant reading, a text must first be prepared appropriately before it can be used as part of the corpus, and the corpus must be cleaned up in advance before the computational analysis. Depending on the researcher's needs, a deep understanding of the material may be necessary in order to maintain quality, such as by identifying false positives as they arise. Alfano (2018) in his Digital Humanities analysis of Nietzsche's concept of drive lists these six steps to summarise his approach:

1. select core **concepts**;
2. **operationalize** concepts to search your source (in this case study, Nietzsche Source);
3. conduct **searches**;
4. **clean** data;
5. **analyze** and **visualize** data; and
6. **close read** relevant pages.

Alfano's use of his analysis<sup>[5]</sup> is primarily as a supplement for close reading, such as figures of how likely it is for certain terms to appear together. There are pros and cons of using Nietzsche: while the short, numbered passages he wrote are useful to turn into visualisations (ibid., pg. 99), close reading as mere sanity check is compulsory because Nietzsche had little regard for disciplined self-consistency and frequently employed irony as part of the argument.

The digital, citation-focused method of collaboration presented in this document differs from traditional philosophical scholarship in a way analogous to how distant reading differs from close reading. Philosophy essays are written in a way that resembles close reading: an argument is worked over by the author until it's just right. In the activity, each student produces a modular component that can be used as part of an argument which can be modified or replaced without fundamentally affecting the other

sections. In principle, the activity could be completed by just one author. It could also accommodate for an indefinitely long chain of arguments, so long as the premises and conclusions are kept consistent. As an exercise in writing, it is akin to treating each section as a function in a coding activity. Understanding that every part of an argument serves a purpose, and that it must be reflected in the essay, is a priceless lesson for a philosophy student. The opportunity to workshop just one section each but also consider its integration into a finished essay, and then to see it in action in the broader context of other essays and a counterargument will be highly instructive.

The most important benefit of the collaborative method introduced in the activity is the standardisation of arguments and resources. As the similarity between arguments and code functions suggests, philosophical work can be made interoperable. All material produced using this method has the advantage of being optimised for collaboration with humans as well as with machines. Potential supporters of an argument can readily identify sections that correspond with their interest and provide a defence or additional justification and evidence, branching out from any given part of a work. A collection of works produced through this standard method can be collated for macroanalysis in order to make connections between them more apparent. Old works that were not written in this way can be revisited by exegetical and hermeneutical researchers and translated into a standard form. Because the system works with formalised arguments, each of the arguments can be collected together as a library that all philosophers may draw upon, extending the list of valid forms of arguments by curating a list of specific applications.

The model of digital philosophy founded on equating arguments with functions in a code library is epistemologically and ideologically biased towards the analytic tradition. It would naturally select for arguments that can be expressed in the standardised form of premises leading up to a conclusion, and skew the practice towards more readily digitised thought. Digital humanities as a whole is open to the same types of critique. Whether such criticisms make sense is an empirical and philosophical question, perfectly suited for digital philosophy to handle through mass collaboration.

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