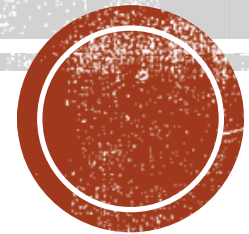


# TEACHING & LEARNING PHILOSOPHY (HSP) IN ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOLS

**PES | March 2016**



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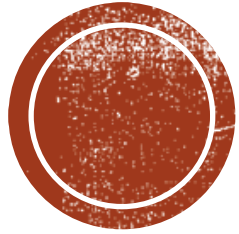
Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

# THINK BACK

- Recall an early experience of learning philosophy (or learning in a philosophical way...)
  - These formative experiences can have a lasting impact
- Our hope is that sharing this study with you can convey our research and aims
- Teaching of philosophy as key area of study for philosophers of education
- Today:
  - Overview
  - Broad research aims of the project
  - Examine teacher interviews



# BACKGROUND



Ontario:

13.6 million

Toronto area:

6-8 million



# HIGH SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY IN ONTARIO

- Introduced as elective “Grade 13” course into the Ontario secondary school system in 1995
- Result of 20-year campaigning by the Ontario Secondary School Philosophy Project, and the Committee of Chairs of Ontario University Departments of Philosophy
- Curriculum revised in 2000 to include elective Grade 11 & 12 after the abolition of Grade 13
- Curriculum revised for the first time in 2013

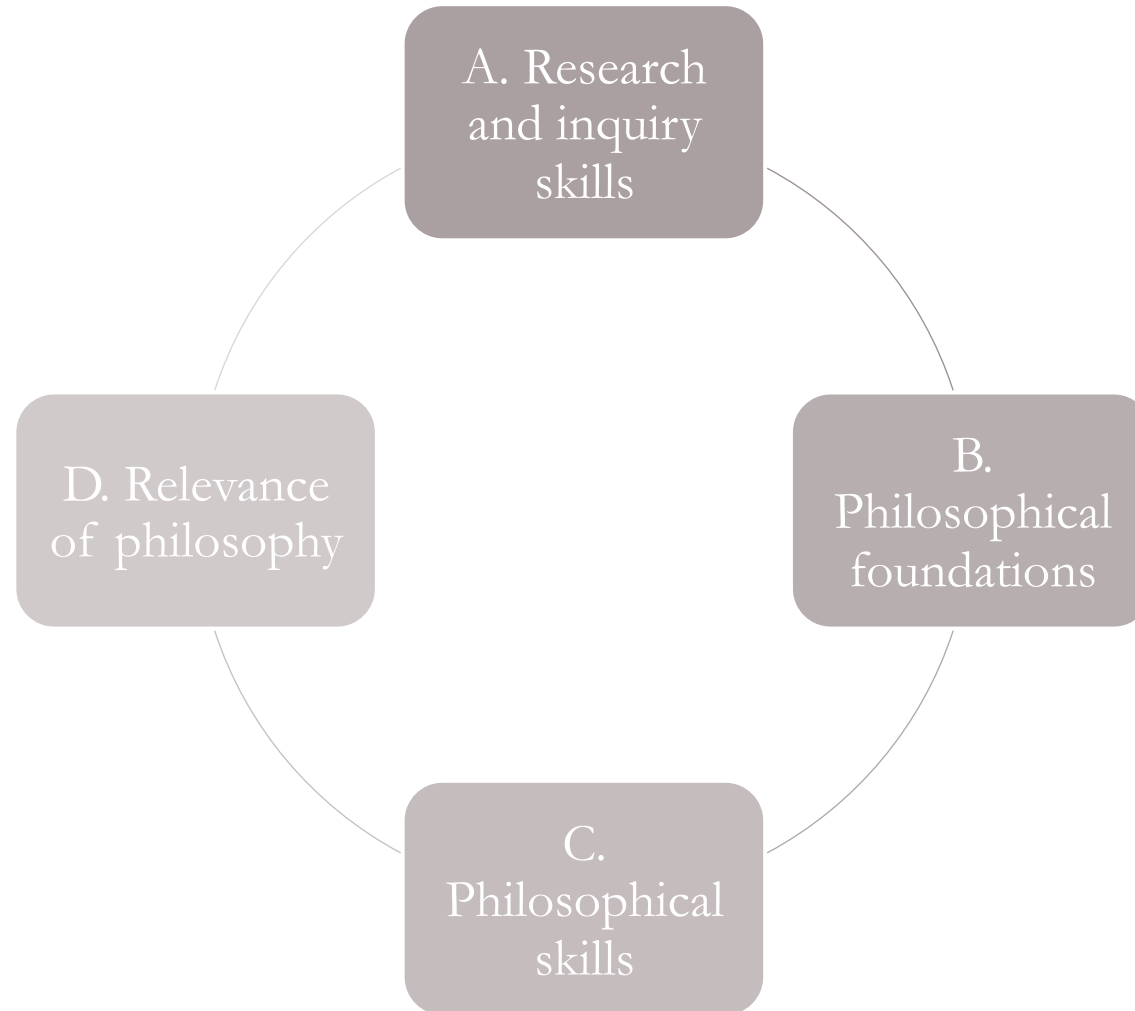


# THE COURSES

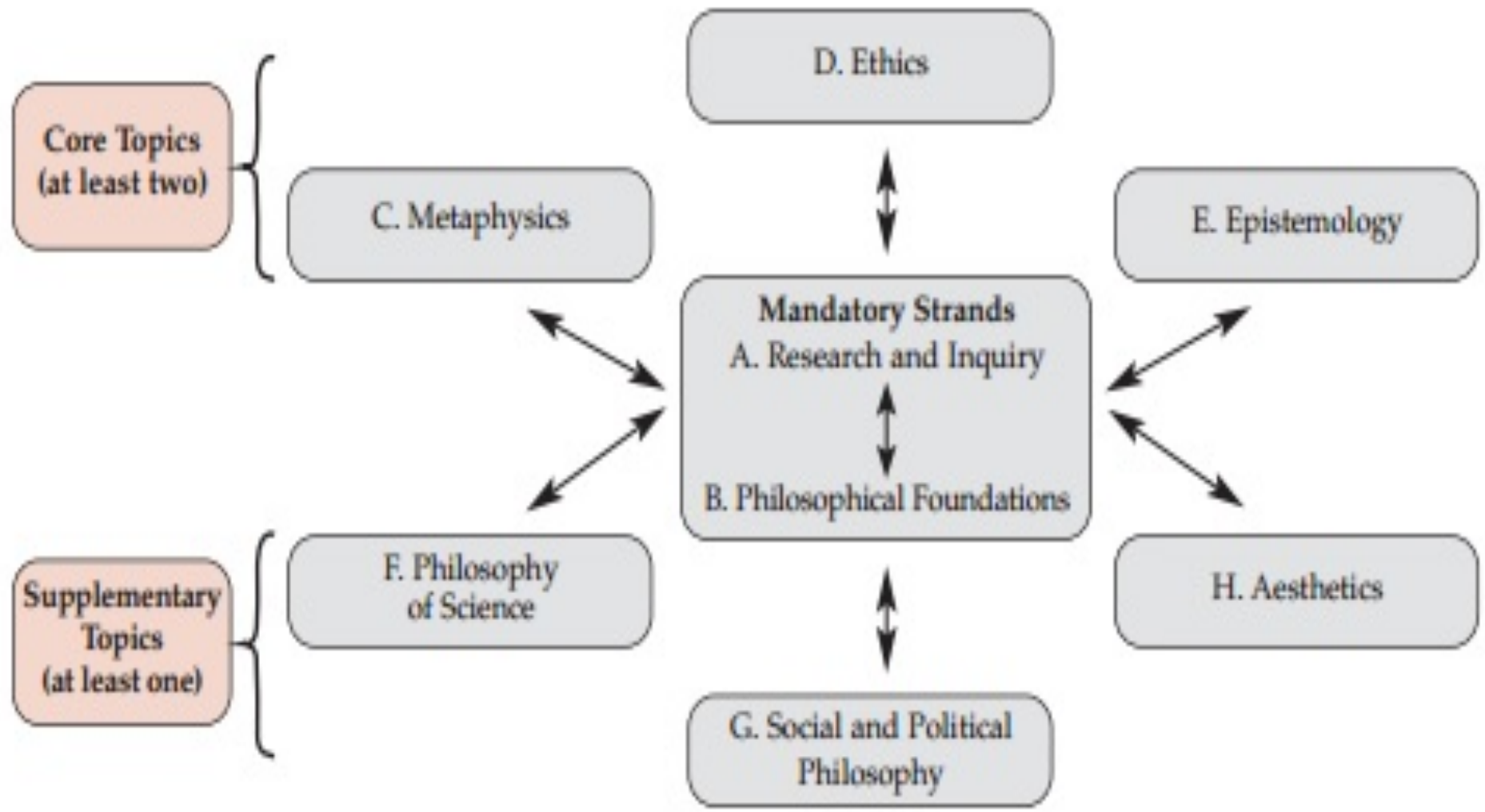
- Elective (non-compulsory) courses developed in 2000, revised in 2013:
  - “Philosophy: The Big Questions”, Grade 11, University/College Preparation (pre-2013 “open” stream/track)
  - “Philosophy: Questions and Theories”, Grade 12 University Preparation
  - No prerequisite for either
- International Baccalaureate® (IB) Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course mandatory to earn IB diploma.
  - Only offered in Ontario schools that offer IB (76 schools)
  - Far less prescriptive than the detailed Ontario curriculum, allowing teachers greater flexibility in course design.



# GRADE 11 PHILOSOPHY

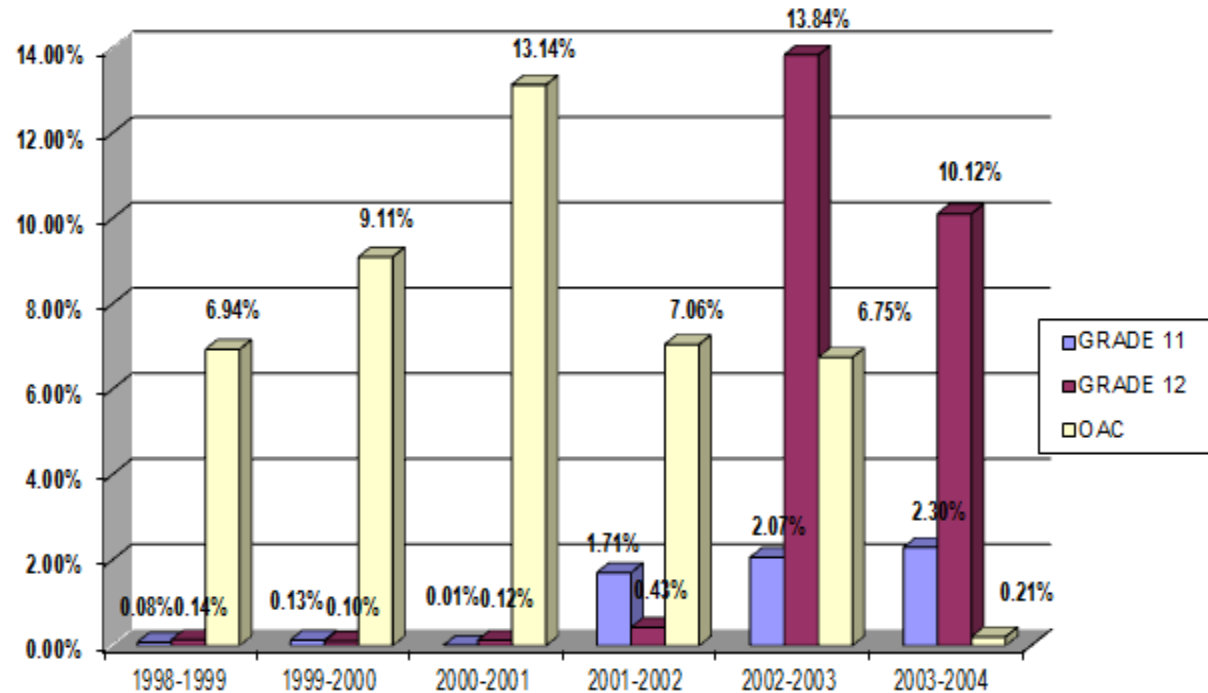


# GRADE 12 PHILOSOPHY

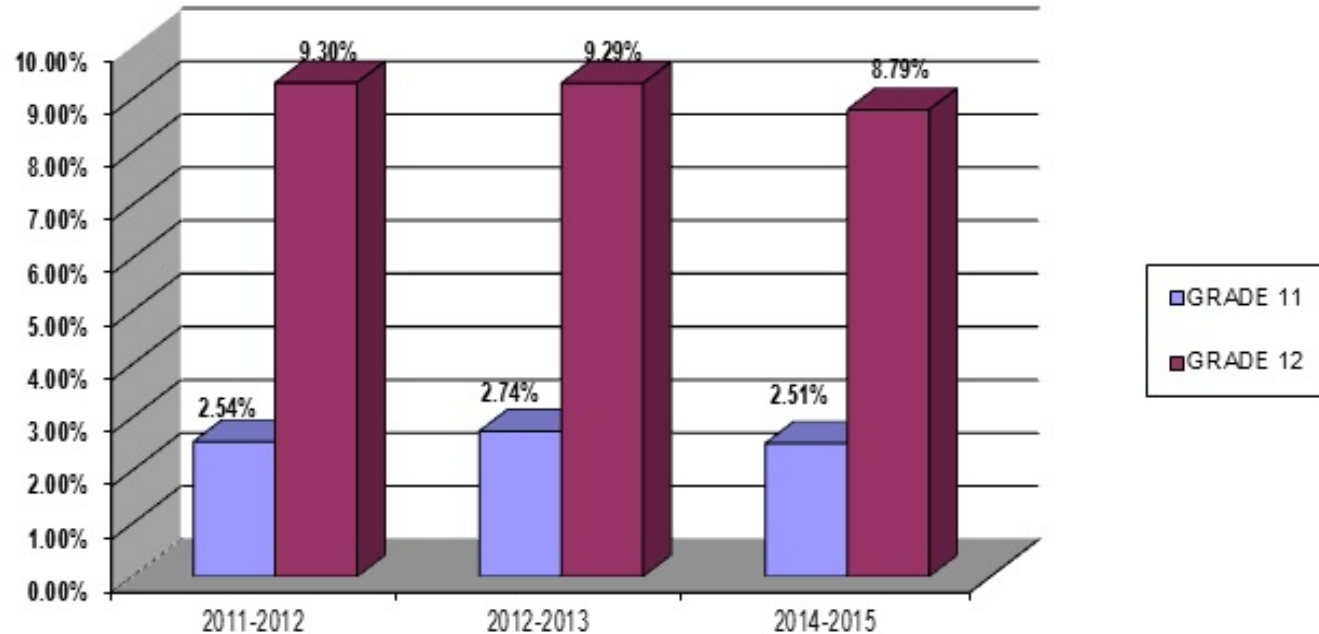


# HSP ENROLMENTS: THEN & NOW

Philosophy by % of enrolment - 1999-2004



Philosophy by % of enrolment - 2011-2015



- Key point: Enrollment is consistent
- Philosophy as a percentage of total high school enrolment has been in the 3% range for grade 11 and the 9% range for grade 12 most years (date for 2005-2010 are currently unavailable)
- 2000-2001 was a “double cohort” year which accounted for a surge
- The reason for the 2002-2003 surge is unknown

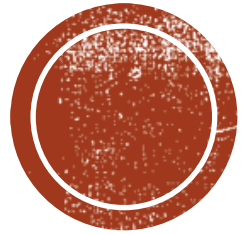




# QUESTIONS ARISING FROM RESEARCH

- Are philosophical “skills” separate from philosophical content?
  - Is philosophy a body of knowledge, or something that people ‘do’?
  - A way of thinking, or ‘who said what’?
  - What is the relationship between content knowledge and pedagogical expertise?
  - What kind of philosophy is being taught when primary sources are not being used?
- How is philosophy changed (or created?) by teaching?
- What do we want these courses to ‘do’? Or not do?
- Is the most popular/common way to teach philosophy actually ‘effective’?
- How unique is philosophy in relation to other courses? Is it really different, and how?
- What ought to be the role of philosophers of education in promoting, researching, designing, and offering professional learning for pre-college philosophy?





# RESEARCH OVERVIEW



# THE RESEARCH

- Funded by the Social Sciences & Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC)
- Builds on earlier work at OISE led by Dwight Boyd
- Critical examination of the methods, practices, and key issues surrounding teaching and learning high school philosophy in Ontario
- Contributes to understanding what occurs in Ontario's high school philosophy classes, and what effects those classes have on students and teachers
- Intended to inform future educational policy, curriculum development, teacher education, and philosophy research
  - Note: not necessarily to provide quantitative empirical evidence of benefits



# RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

**How philosophy is conceived, practiced, and experienced by those involved in its teaching and learning by:**

- (1) exploring how philosophy teachers interpret and experience the teaching of philosophy;
- (2) exploring how students are impacted by studying philosophy; and
- (3) examining dynamics within the philosophy classroom as they relate to objectives (1) and (2).



# DATA COLLECTION

- Data collected 2012-2013
- Represent multiple communities and school types (public, private; English & French; Catholic, secular; rural, urban, suburban) in Ontario
- 16 schools representing Grade 11 HSP, Grade 12 HSP, and IB TOK courses
  - One-on-one, semi-structured teacher **interviews**
  - Multiple, unobtrusive **observations** of HSP classes in action
  - **Focus groups** with students enrolled in those same courses
- Multiple data sources provide richness, and allow for triangulation of perspectives and perceptions, including the often-overlooked student perspective



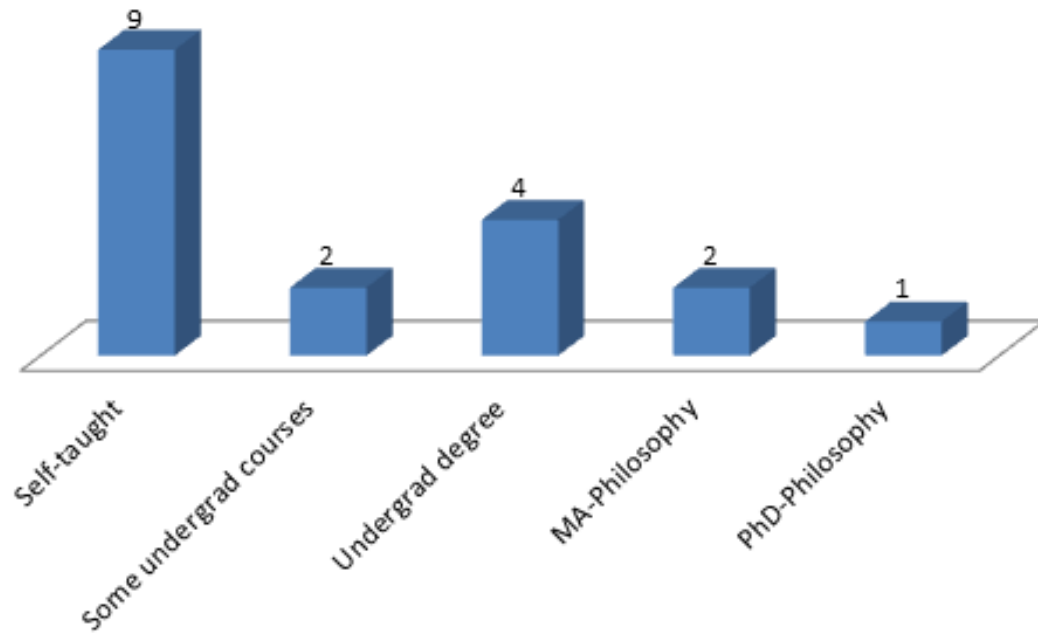
# PARTICIPANT/DATA OVERVIEW

Schools (16) (4 Catholic Public, 7 Public, 2 French public, 3 Private)	Teacher Interviews (19) (6 F, 13 M)	Classroom Observations	Focus Groups with Students
Crito (Catholic, Suburban)	Mr. Thucydides	7 observations	9 students
Phaedo (Public, Suburban)	Mr. Plato, Mr. Aristotle	8 observations	6 students
Charmides (Public, Urban)	Ms. Nietzsche	8 observations	5 students
Laches (Private, Urban, all girls)	Ms. Cicero	8 observations	--
Gorgias (Public/French, Urban)	Mr. Machiavelli	8 observations	6 students
Lysis (Public, Urban)	Ms. Hobbes, Ms. Locke	16 observations	8 students; 17 students
Meno (Public, Urban)	Mr. Rousseau	6 observations	3 students
Phaedrus (Public, Urban)	Mr. Marx	8 observations	5 students
Symposium (Public/French, Suburban)	Mr. Xenophon	8 observations	10 students
Republic (Catholic, Suburban)	Mr. Mill	8 observations	6 students
Parmenides (Catholic, Urban)	Mr. Kant	8 observations	9 students
Timaeus (Catholic, Suburban)	Ms. Hegel	8 observations	8 students
Statesman (Private, Urban, all boys)	Mr. Heidegger	15 observations	4 students; 3 students
Sophist (Public, Urban, alternative)	Ms. Arendt	8 observations	4 students
Critas (Private, Urban, all boys)	Mr. Foucault, Mr. Derrida	6 observations	6 students, 4 students
Laws (Public, Suburban)	Mr. Zizek	7 observations	2 students

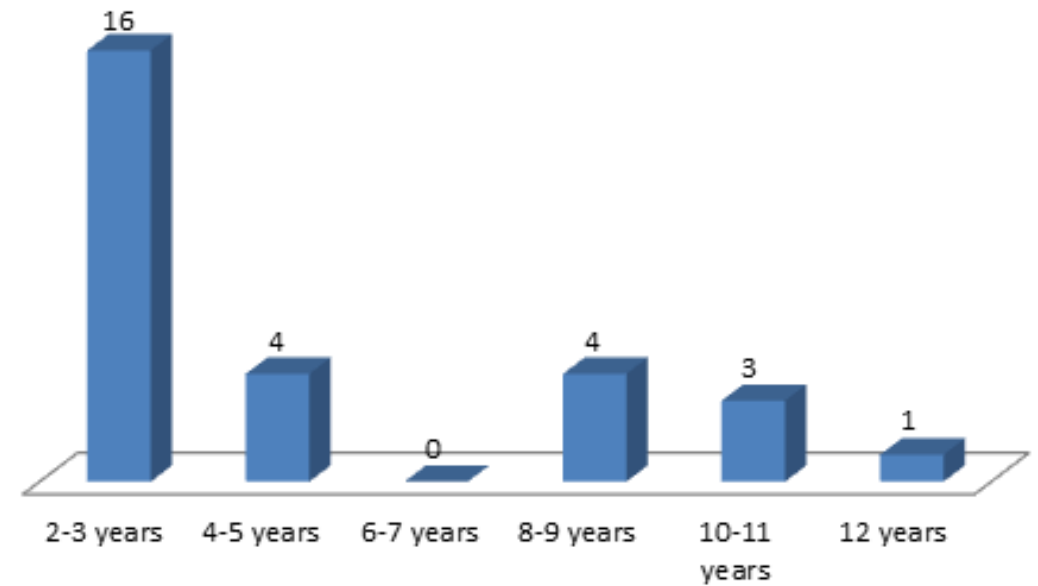


# TEACHER BACKGROUND & EXPERIENCE

## Educational Background in Philosophy



## Years of Teaching Experience



# ANALYSIS SPECIFICS

- **Current**

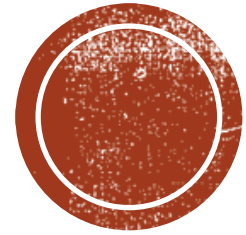
- Straight-on thematic analysis

- **Forthcoming**

- **Triangulation among data sets**
- **Grounded theory**
- **Discourse analysis**
  - Rhetorical construction of “critical thinking”
- **Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**
  - Rhetorical construction of the student







PRELIMINARY FINDINGS:  
STRAIGHT-ON THEMES  
OF TEACHER  
INTERVIEWS

# THEMES SUMMARY

Theme	Description (details follow)
Aims	Most participants cited critical thinking (or a variant of it) as a principal aim in teaching philosophy.
“Teaching is teaching,” but...	Participants saw “good teaching” as roughly the same regardless of discipline, but noted that philosophy allows flexibility in content/topics
Importance of relevance	Just about all participants emphasized that HSP needs to be “relevant” to students.
The trouble with relativism	Most participants expressed concern over relativism in the classroom
Student-centred if necessary, but not necessarily student-centred	Most participants struggled with a perceived need for student-centered learning, but seemed to experience difficulty putting it into practice
Autonomy within policy	While all participants described themselves as having autonomy in HSP, they perceived themselves as bound by centralized policy



# A CLOSER LOOK AT AIMS CITED

Aim	Frequency
Critical thinking (CT)/logic/ reasoning/argumentation	15
Canonical knowledge	5
Ability to apply philosophy to other/all aspects of life and subjects	3
Ability to write (e.g., essays)	2
Self-knowledge	2
Social justice or “social justice/international perspective”	2
Creative thinking	2
Autonomy and self direction	2
Extrinsic ends (earn this credit, or succeed at university)	1
Love of philosophy	1
Wisdom	1
Catholic traditions of faith and reason	1



# “TEACHING IS TEACHING”

*“a teacher’s a teacher” – Mr. Thucydides*

*“teaching is teaching” – Mr. Foucault*

*“The strategies that would work in a philosophy class would work in any other class”  
– Ms. Nietzsche*

- Participants did not specify a unique “pedagogy for philosophy,” though this question warrants additional analysis and investigation



# ...BUT PHILOSOPHY IS DIFFERENT

*“It has more, so much more open-ended material that other courses don’t...it’s not math, it’s not science” – Ms. Locke*

*“The goal of philosophy is different in the sense that like, there is no defined output, like it’s more about the ability to ask questions than it is to have answers; that’s, I think, a fundamental difference” - Mr. Zizek*

- While most raised the issue that good teaching is similar regardless of subject discipline, they noted some qualitative differences to HSP compared to other courses
- Most described HSP as more flexible and open-ended than other courses and subjects (for example, history teachers contrasted the chronological order of history curricula, and the pre-fabricated narrative)
- We wonder: is the open-ended aspect of philosophy a good thing or bad thing? How does it impact learning?



# TEACHERS' VIEWS OF 'RELATIVISM'

*“I share with them a little Alan Bloom and his idea of the crisis in American education that now we’re inducting everyone into a relativistic mindset...there’s also really shallow anti-relativism that’s trying to lead people back into a creationist mindset. And when I see that I think that’s sad” – Mr. Plato*

*“in my first year a couple of students picked up on the relativism idea and just went with it. And there was nothing else I could do!” --Ms. Hobbes*

*Rather than dogmatism, “relativism is more the thing I fight against.” – Mr. Marx*

- Many raised concerns about relativism (especially when asked about their experience with dogmatic attitudes in class)
- Many saw their role as challenging “relativistic” positions that students express
- Some remarked that the “relativistic” positions might be consistent with adolescence



# TEACHERS' VIEWS OF "RELATIVISM"

*"most adults, pretty much are relativistic in that they do what benefits them. So really, actually, I mean, it's kind of a lesson inside the course; when it comes to things like marks, and furthering themselves, they will do what needs to be done to further their own way." – Mr. Kant*

*"the relativism, I guess that has to do with the whole postmodern kind of thing, where I'm in my own little world. The egocentric predicament" – Mr. Mill*

- Responses (reflected in the quotations) suggest possible confusion about "relativism" among participants, warranting further analysis and discussion



# STUDENT-CENTRED IF NECESSARY, BUT NOT NECESSARILY STUDENT-CENTERDNESS

*“lecture style conversation, um, really student directed” – Mr. Heidegger*

- Offered contradictory (both self-contradictory and contradicting one another) positions on pedagogies
- While most (with the exception of a minority who felt that students needed to learn to sit through lectures and take notes) perceived that learning should be student-centred, they struggled with how to actualize this
- Some declared that they were engaging in student-centered pedagogies, but examples given (e.g., teacher-selected videos shown to classes) suggested teacher-driven and passive pedagogies were used most often by most participants





# AUTONOMY WITHIN POLICY

*“[with]the curriculum obviously I have no autonomy, but after that, yeah, I have full autonomy.” – Mr. Kant*

*“we are, by ministry law, we are obligated to include 2 of the 3 major units” – Mr. Aristotle*

- Perceived greater autonomy in HSP than other subjects/courses with respect to topics and content
- Most indicated that because they were the only HSP teachers in the school, they had autonomy within the constraints of curriculum policy – suggesting that curriculum was prescribed (to an extent), but they had autonomy in teaching methods and sometimes resources
- Many mentioned adherence to Ministry curriculum in one way or another, but commented on its flexibility (unlike other subject areas)



# AUTONOMY AND CONTROVERSY

*“I’m not entitled to an opinion. My job is to represent what we [Catholics] believe in...kind of the company line” – Mr. Heidegger*

*“I’m conscious of that in terms of not offending anyone in the community... we honour curriculum and ministry documents...we have a great deal of academic freedom [but] there are curriculum responsibilities and there are laws of things that you can and can’t talk about” – Ms. Locke*

- Even among those who expressed autonomy, some (but not all) felt constrained in terms of offering their own perspectives on issues in class.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF RELEVANCE

*“I don't see philosophy having any relevance if it's not engaged in the problems of the times.” – Mr. Thucydides*

*“I said, watch the Super Bowl, tell me what philosophies you're seeing in there...bringing it into the real world is most effective just sitting their reading out of the book.” – Mr. Hegel*

*“make it relevant...if they can see ‘hey there is philosophy in this, that I would normally not think about it’ I think that is where it really gets them engaged and interested.” Ms. Nietzsche*

- Participants emphasized the need for HSP to be “relevant” to students, though conceptions of what constituted relevance varied
- While this seemed to be a dominant perspective, it raises the issue of what is marginalized when (sometimes superficial) versions of relevance are privileged.
- Note: “Relevance of Philosophy” is a strand (unit) in the Grade 11 curriculum, which may influence teachers’ responses



# LINKS TO FOCUS GROUPS

## RELEVANCE & “RELATE TO”

- *Among students, “relevant” is usually code for ‘in the media’.*
  - *Make it ‘relevant’ by using Youtube. It’s relevant if it’s online.*
- *“I think one of the best ways to learn philosophy is to not necessarily talk about Descartes or Plato themselves but ...we talk a lot about The Matrix and other things like that, and that helps us learn because it's, uh, it's something we can relate to and it's hard to relate to someone who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century writing in Latin*
- ‘Relevance’ or ‘relate to’ is a contentious and variable notion
- Assumption that philosophy itself is not intrinsically interesting unless made ‘relevant’ via popular culture.



# LINKS TO FOCUS GROUPS WITH STUDENTS– “RELATE TO”

- Many philosophers throughout history noted that philosophy must be informed by and impact the times in which philosophy ‘happens’.
- Philosophy began by being ‘relevant’! Socrates references things that would be considered ‘relevant’ to his interlocutors:
  - Greek tragedians, historians, founding myths, daily crafts and activities, etc.
  - Are today’s teachers as ‘good’ at making philosophy relevant as Socrates? In other words, able to use ‘relevant’ material in a philosophical manner,
  - Unlike Socrates, these courses attempt to incorporate thousands of years of thinking
  - Are ‘old books’ ‘irrelevant’? Or, only relevant if connected with popular culture?



# NEXT STEPS

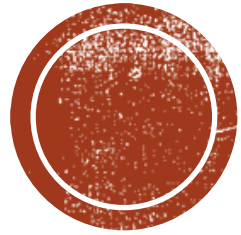
- **Continue data analysis**
  - **Triangulation** across data sets to construct cameo cases and to identify themes across sets and participants
  - Apply different **analytic techniques** (identified earlier)
- Given the power of **policy** to shape course organization and topics, critical analysis of policy content should be conducted to round out analysis of the corpus
- **Results dissemination and knowledge mobilization**
  - Report and other materials forthcoming
  - Materials and publications will be shared via our **project website** as they become available



# CONCLUSION

- Ontario HSP teachers who participated in the study report diverse perspectives on their enactment of the courses
- Commonalities include:
  - Some consensus on aims
  - Much consistency on course organization and topics, which appear to be driven by policy compliance
  - General agreement about autonomy – though within the constraints of policy
- Diversity in the following aspects:
  - Divergent perspectives and practices about pedagogy





# QUESTIONS?

[HTTP://HSPHIL.WEEBLY.COM/](http://HSPHIL.WEEBLY.COM/)





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