

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> St Mary's University College
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 32: Philosophy
<b>Title of case study:</b> Philosophical Dialogue and Rhetoric Creating an Alternative Space for Thinking Together
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>This case study demonstrates the impact of research on Philosophical Dialogue and Rhetoric in the context of the marketisation of Higher Education. In this context, impact was (and is) created through the facilitation of Socratic dialogues, and the dissemination of reflections on the pedagogical nature of these dialogues against the increasing marketisation of Higher Education. This case study aims to show a change in awareness, attitude and understanding of individual participants, especially a (philosophical) reevaluation of their own experience. It also aims to change the pedagogical attitudes and practices of participating teachers and lecturers.</p>
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>The research which underpins this case study, started with the examination of forms of writing specific to philosophy. This includes analysis of the prominent use of thought experiments (Altorf, 2005), as well as reflections on the idiosyncratic writing style of Iris Murdoch and the biographies and status of women in philosophy (Altorf, 2008 and Altorf, 2011a).</p> <p>The above research inspired two pedagogical projects, both funded via a rigorous selection process by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (HEA). The first of these projects, 'Dialogue as a Written Form of Assessment' (2009-2010) examined the possibilities of the use of written dialogue as a form of assessment in an undergraduate philosophy degree. This project went beyond the initial remit and included reflections on the growing marketisation of higher education.</p> <p>The second project, 'Socratic Dialogue in Education' (2010-2011) pursued the issue of marketisation further. It started from the supposition that a Socratic Dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition would offer both a space and a means to reflect on the position of philosophy in higher education that resists the prevailing use of terms like 'delivery', 'consumer', etc. It also argued that resistance should come from practice and not just theoretical reflection. This second project resulted in a publication in peer reviewed journal (Altorf, 2013), as well as a report (Altorf, 2011b), which is freely available from academia.edu.</p> <p>While Altorf (2013) concluded the research within the REF assessment period, the project continues. Further publications are planned (with C. Monahan, 'Philosophical Dialogue and Persuasion: Rewriting the Gorgias', to be submitted in December 2013, and Altorf, 'Thinking as an Act of Resistance: Arendt and the Practice of Socratic Dialogue', to be submitted in 2014) as well as the development of a web resource on philosophical dialogue and rhetoric (<a href="http://philosophicaldialogueandrhetoric.wordpress.com/">http://philosophicaldialogueandrhetoric.wordpress.com/</a>).</p>

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As the resources cited suggest, the key researcher of this case study is Altorf, who joined St Mary's in 2005 as the Programme Director of Philosophy. On the first project Altorf collaborated with Geoff Case, who was at the time the Royal Literary Fellow at St. Mary's. The collaborator for the second project was Dr. M.F. Willemsen (Free University Amsterdam).

### Key insights:

1. Socratic Dialogue provides a space and means to resist the growing marketisation of higher education. It does so through 'thinking in questions' (Van Rossem 2011), through 'philosophising instead of doing philosophy' (Nelson 1927), and in its emphasis on experience. It resists, for instance, the omnipresent need for 'outcomes', and it allows disagreement to exist without immediately positing a discourse of winners and losers.
2. Socratic Dialogue offers a means of teaching philosophising, rather than learning about philosophers. There is a specific need for this kind of learning in the present circumstances, and not just at universities.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. M. Altorf (2013), '*Selling Socrates: The Unexamined Life and the University*' [Diskurs: Gesellschafts- und geisteswissenschaftliche Interventionen. Peer reviewed and at: <http://www.diskurszeitschrift.de/2013/09/10/ausgabe-2013-wissenschaft-am-scheideweg>.
2. M. Altorf (2011b), 'Socratic Dialogue in Education'. [Report available from academia.edu]
3. M. Altorf (2011a), 'After cursing the library: Iris Murdoch and the (in)visibility of women in philosophy'. *Hypatia* 26.2, pp. 384-402.  
Altorf 2011a is a peer reviewed article, that has also been selected for a special issue of Hypatia, that is freely available. The special issue has been edited by Ann E. Cudd, and is entitled 'Virtual Issue: Hypatia Essays on the Place of Women in the Profession of Philosophy' [[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1527-2001/homepage/virtual\\_issue\\_\\_hypatia\\_essays\\_on\\_the\\_place\\_of\\_women\\_in\\_the\\_profession\\_of\\_philoso.htm](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1527-2001/homepage/virtual_issue__hypatia_essays_on_the_place_of_women_in_the_profession_of_philoso.htm)]
4. M. Altorf (2010), 'On Written Dialogue as a Form of Assessment'. *Discourse* 10.1, pp. 153-172. Also available via <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/subjects/prs/on-written-dialogue>. This article is peer reviewed and has been taken up by other open resources, such as for instance the Society for the Study of Theology (see <http://www.theologysociety.org.uk/students.asp>)
5. M. Altorf (2008), *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*. London: Continuum.  
Altorf (2008) has been reviewed 5 times. Reviewed in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (2009), Literature and Theology (2009), Religious Studies (2009), Journal of Religion (2011), Heythrop Journal 2011.
6. M. Altorf (2005), 'Filosofische verbeelding: Over winkelwagentjes, grasvelden en de vrouw als onbegrijpelijke afgrond' [Philosophical Imagination: On Meadows, Trolleys and Woman as an Inexplicable Abyss.] *Wijzgerig Perspectief [Philosophical Perspective]* 45-1, pp. 22-30.  
Altorf (2005) is peer reviewed. It can be provided on request from the institution.

**Impact case study (REF3b)****4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact described in this case study has been pursued via practice and presentation. Altorf has organised Socratic dialogues on such topics as 'What is learning?', 'Why should you respect someone's autonomy?', 'What is my responsibility to my community?', etc. Most dialogues are held at St. Mary's University College and are open to the general public. She has also facilitated dialogues in Amsterdam and Berlin. Participants have included lawyers, artists, and teachers.

Evidence of impact has been gathered in the form of spoken and written feedback. This feedback confirms the findings of the research. People who experience the method for the first time affirm that participating in a dialogue is a new experience to them, incomparable to anything and impossible to learn in any other way than by participating. Many mention the new insight that it is possible to entertain diverging views. Thus, people are surprised that 'hugely different approaches were able to find common ground to work from', or that 'people were able to listen to one another and not argue'. People also comment on the fact that it was not necessary to find an answer ('outcome') to the philosophical question posed. They question the use of experience, and understand that each dialogue is different, and that this kind of dialogue cannot be standardised into a product. It should be noted that Socratic Dialogues are being 'sold' to companies. The practice is not without controversy. (See for instance J. Kessels (1997). *Socrates op de markt: Filosofie in bedrijf*. Amsterdam: Boom). The feedback thus suggests that as a direct result of participating in a Socratic Dialogue participants acquire awareness of a new way of dialogue, that challenges the limitations of a model of argument based on competition and result. The potential for conflict resolution is a topic of future research, and possibly impact. Interest is also expressed in the method. At the end of every dialogue, as well as at selected moments throughout the dialogues, participants will engage in a meta-dialogue, which considers not the content, but the nature of the dialogue. Questionnaire questions include: 'What did you like best about the day?', 'What surprised you?', etc. as well as open ended questions for any further comments.

Because of the requirements of the dialogue, numbers are limited. Dialogues have been held on the following dates: November 2010 (afternoon), March 2011 (day long dialogue), September 2012 (two day dialogue), June 2013 (day long dialogue). In addition, dialogues have been facilitated at other locations on request: Amsterdam (March 2012), Berlin (July 2013). The method has also been used in the undergraduate module 'Philosophy in Schools and the Community' at St. Mary's University College. The topic of the module concerns philosophy with children, where students were taught to teach philosophy to primary school children and to reflect on this practice. Thus, ideas from this research were brought to the school yard. This module ran for the first time in Spring 2013, in collaboration with the Philosophy Foundation.

The reach of the impact has been widened by presenting findings orally and in written form.

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Presentations were given in Glasgow (2012, by invitation) at a conference of the Public Philosophy Network in Washington (2011), at the last conference of the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (2011), at the Joint Session (2011), and the London Conference in Critical Thought (2013). The written presentations are listed above as Altorf (2011b) and Altorf (2013). Findings have also been presented in non-academic resources such as an open web resource (M. Altorf (2011), 'Socrates, Apologie'. Humanistische Canon [[http://www.humanistischecanon.nl/logos\\_paideia/socrates](http://www.humanistischecanon.nl/logos_paideia/socrates)]) and an article in a Dutch national newspaper (M. Altorf (2012), 'De retoriek van Kerst'. NRC Handelsblad 24 September 2012.)

The spoken and written presentations have had the widest reach. For instance, Altorf (2011b) has been consulted by people from different countries, ranging from Ghana to the United States, Australia and South Africa, and is viewed on average every other day. The paper presentations were attended by international audiences between 15 and 45 people, of academics and political activists, some of whom are now following Altorf on academia.edu. The text in Discourse has been distributed to all universities in the United Kingdom. Its online version received a number of hits. (95 hits since the closure of the Subject Centre in July 2011. No numbers available for the period preceding.) The open resource on The Apology received 3942 hits, of which 3303 unique visitors. NRC Handelsblad has 203,000 readers. Visitor figures for the digital edition are not available.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Participants have been given questionnaires, the results of which have been collated and are available for further reference.
2. The following participants are available for interview: Head of Legal Operations, Procurement and Sky Media at BskyB, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Wolverhampton, Pastoral theologian and organisational development consultant, Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul Services (DCSVP Services), Lecturer, Amsterdam University College
3. Academia.edu reports are available for further reference.
4. For evidence of impact of Socratic dialogue in networks such as schools and their impact, please see [www.sfcp.org.uk](http://www.sfcp.org.uk).