

## Mellon Evidence-Based Teaching Project Report

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### 1. *Project Description*

- a. For this project, I gave only structured feedback on individual assignments with no accompanying grade, and instituted a series of student self-assessment tasks for the determination of semester grades.
- b. This change to course assessment procedures was designed to address two challenges. First, because the majority of students who enroll in 200-level philosophy courses are new to the discipline of philosophy, there is often a steep learning curve. Students who are used to academic success can become demoralized when their initial grades are not what they expect, which functions as an impediment to future improvement. Moreover, students are inclined to view early grades as a proxy for their potential in the course, which prevents them from focusing on the constructive criticism offered on individual assignments. As I explain below, these impressions are backed up by empirical evidence about the effects of grades on student learning. More broadly, this change aimed to reorient students' thinking around the substantive ends of a liberal arts education, in contrast with the mere mechanistic pursuit of specific grades.
- c. These changes aimed at two specific outcomes meant to address the challenges described above. First, they aimed to facilitate student improvement over the course of the semester by emphasizing engagement with substantive feedback on written assignments, as well as student reflection on the progress they have made and the steps they need to take next. Second, they aimed to decrease student anxiety about grades by emphasizing improvement and development over the course of the semester.
- d. I ended up implementing these changes in two 200 courses during the Spring 2019 semester (PHIL 203: Philosophy of Art, and PHIL/ES 234: From Wilderness to Ruins), after piloting the changes in a 300-level seminar in the Fall. There were 59 students enrolled across the two courses. Students in each course wrote three essays (plus optional rewrites) and composed 10 discussion questions. I communicated expectations for the course, and then at both mid-semester and the end of the semester asked students to complete a self-assessment that guided them through applying Wellesley's grading standards to evaluate their success in meeting the course expectations. This included giving themselves a letter grade for the course, though I made clear in the course policies that I reserved the right to assign the grade I thought was most appropriate. I also provided brief but specific feedback to every student's mid-semester self-assessment.

### 2. *Research Evidence*

A growing body of literature supports the idea that letter grades can inhibit student learning, and points to a variety of interventions, including self-assessment, which can redirect students' attention and effort toward meaningful educational goals. Some examples of this literature across multiple disciplines include:

- Schinske J, Tanner K. Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently). *CBE Life Sciences Education*. 2014; 13(2):159-166. doi:10.1187/cbe.CBE-14-03-0054. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/>
- Lipnevich A, Smith J. Response to Assessment Feedback: The Effects of Grades, Praise, and Source of Information. *Educational Testing Services Research Report*. 2018. <https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-08-30.pdf>
- Elbow P. Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment. *College English*. 1994; 12. Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng\\_faculty\\_pubs/12](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs/12)
- Reeves D. Leading to Change/Effective Grading Practices. *Educational Leadership*. 2009; 65.5: 85–87. Web. 23 June 2013. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb08/vol65/num05/Effective-Grading-Practices.aspx>

There are also a number of useful blog posts from faculty who have made similar changes that I plan to draw on in developing a system that works best for my students. In particular:

- <https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/>
- <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>

### 3. Results:

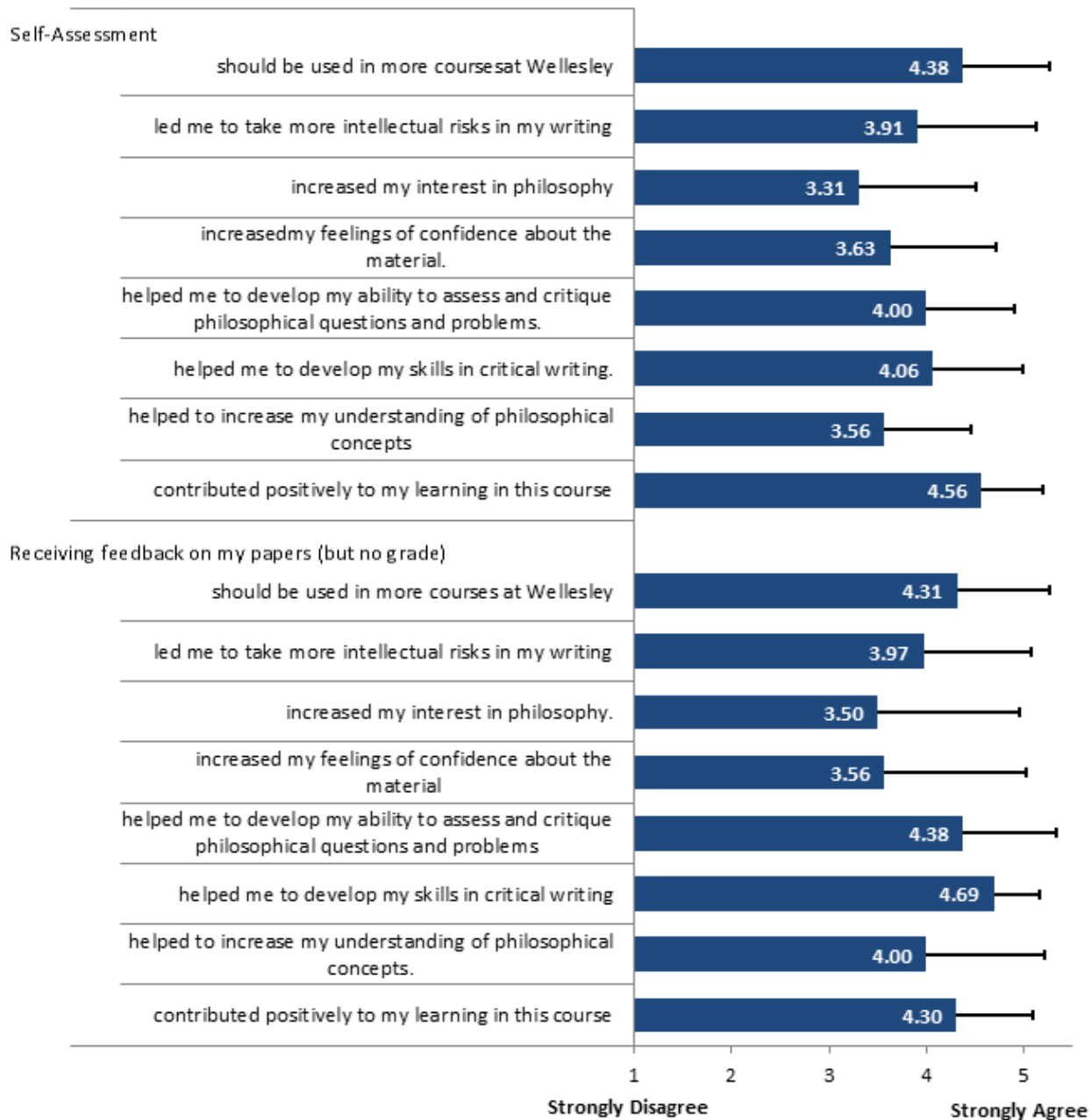
- a. I believe the project was a great success. Of the 59 students, I gave 56 students the grade they elected in their self-assessments. For two students, I increased their grade by 1/3; for one student, I decreased the grade by 1/3. But the vast majority of the reported grades were the ones the students assigned to themselves. In each of these courses, the average rose compared with previous iterations of the course. My courses have typically had average grades in the vicinity of 3.33 (this was also the case in my grading prior to joining the Wellesley faculty). In these courses the averages were around 3.66. (Though I should note that there are an anomalous 5 Incompletes in 234, which will no doubt influence the final average).
- b. I suspect that this increase in the average is a result of two factors. First, as one might expect from the averages, there were many more A- grades than B+ grades compared with previous semesters (also more A's, but only a few more). In some (though not many) of these cases, my own assessment of the student's work would likely have been a B+. Reading the narrative portion of their self-assessments, it was clear that these students were not weighing the three papers as heavily as I would have liked in their overall assessment (they put more weight on their 10 discussion questions, class participation, meeting their learning goals, improvement, etc.). This was helpful information, and I now know that I need to be even clearer in guiding the students' self-assessment process and ensuring that they are adequately focused on assessing achievement rather than effort.
- c. The second factor, however, is that when we put aside these borderline cases, I think more students genuinely earned A- grades. I am of course wary of confirmation bias here, but the impression I came away with is that students in these courses mastered

more philosophical skills than in previous semesters. They also produced some of the most exciting, creative thinking that I've seen in my six years at Wellesley, and I'd like to think that freedom from the traditional grading structure had something to do with that.

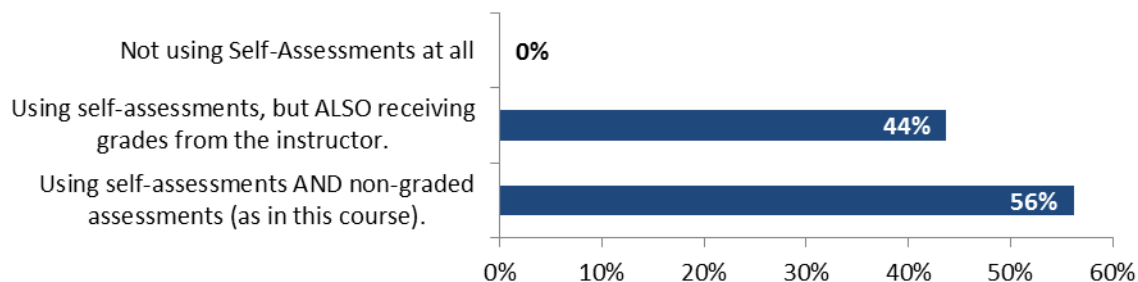
- d.* The results of exit surveys (attached) at least indicate that many students had a positive response to both “ungrading” and self-assessment (especially the latter), and saw these interventions as facilitating their learning, especially with respect to critical writing, which was one of the main goals of the project. I perhaps should have asked more directly about whether these interventions decreased students’ perceived anxiety about grades, and will plan to do so in the future. But it seems reasonable to infer from the other survey results that these changes contributed positively to the students’ experience in the course.
- e.* As I implemented the ungrading and self-assessment changes, I continued to see further benefits to the approach:
  - i.* It changed my relationship with the students. I wasn’t the keeper of grades they were trying to win, but a coach trying to help them develop their skills and produce their most successful work. We didn’t talk about grades: we talked about how to improve.
  - ii.* It removed the need for me to police deadlines and extensions. One of the course expectations was that work be turned in on time, and students had to assess whether they met this expectation.
  - iii.* I have always told my students that I care about where they end up, not where they start. It’s difficult for them to hear that while receiving a C on their first paper. Moreover, even in a grading system where initial assignments are worth a smaller percentage of the final grade, students are still ultimately penalized for early work that is less successful. I see no value in this setup. Philosophy is too difficult to phone it in during early assignments and then write a great essay at the end of the course. Students need to work steadily throughout the course in order to improve, and so nothing is gained by penalizing them for their less successful early efforts: it simply privileges those students with better preparation by setting them up to earn a higher course grade. I was mindful going into this experiment that UREM students might self-assess more negatively than other students. It would be worth studying this further, but anecdotally, it did not seem to be the case at all.
- f.* I look forward to continuing to experiment with these methods in the future, and I want to thank the Mellon Foundation for grant support that was pivotal to getting this project off the ground. Thanks as well to Sarah Pociask for her advice and support on assessment.

## Assessment of Phil 203 & Phil/ES 243 Spring 2019

Phil 203 – Student Ratings of Self-Assessment and Receiving Feedback without Grades, N = 16



**If given the choice, which of the following options would you prefer?**



## Heat Map of Student Responses – Phil 203

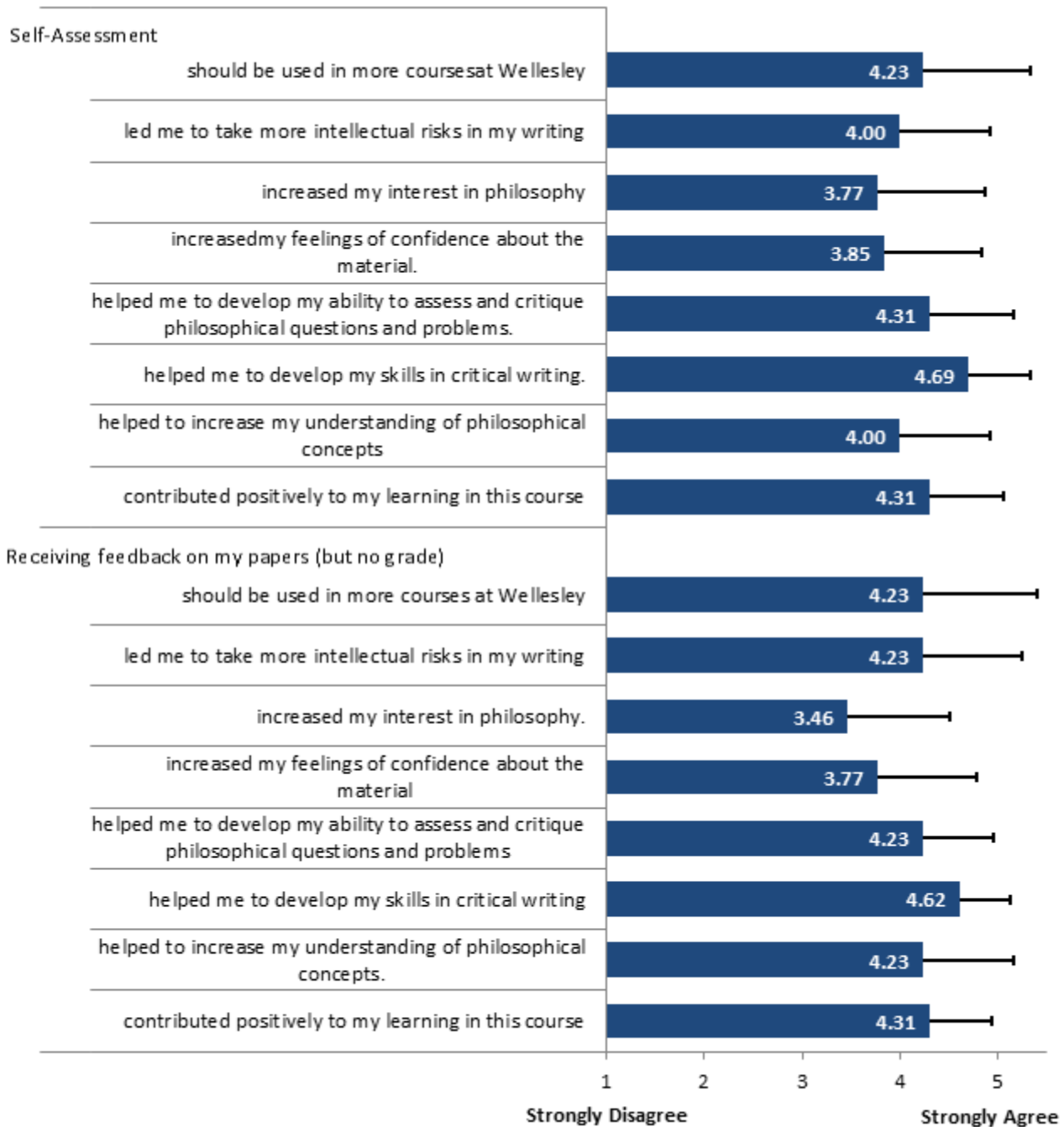
This figure displays all student responses, with each row representing a single student's responses. Each column is a separate question. Green represents favorable ratings, red less favorable (see scale below).

	Receiving feedback on my papers (but no grade)								Self-Assessment							
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16
Student	2	1	4	2	1	1	4	2	3	2	2	4	2	3	4.5	2
Student	4	2	4	3	1	1	3	5	4	3	3	2	3	3	2	5
Student	4	4	5	5	2	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	2	1	2	3
Student	4	3	4	3	4	3	2	3	5	3	4	3	5	3	2	4
Student	4	4	5	5	3	2	3	4	4	3	4	4	2	2	3	4
Student	5	4	5	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	4
Student	4	3	5	5	2	3	5	4	4	3	5	5	3	3	5	5
Student	4.5	5	4	5	3	3	5	5	5	3	3	3	4	3	5	5
Student		5	5	4	4	5	3.5	5	5	4	4	4	3	2	3	5
Student	4	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	3	3	3	4	3	5	4
Student	4	5	4	5	3	3	4	5	5	3	5	4	4	3	4	5
Student	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	5
Student	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	4	5	5	5	5
Student	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4
Student	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Student	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

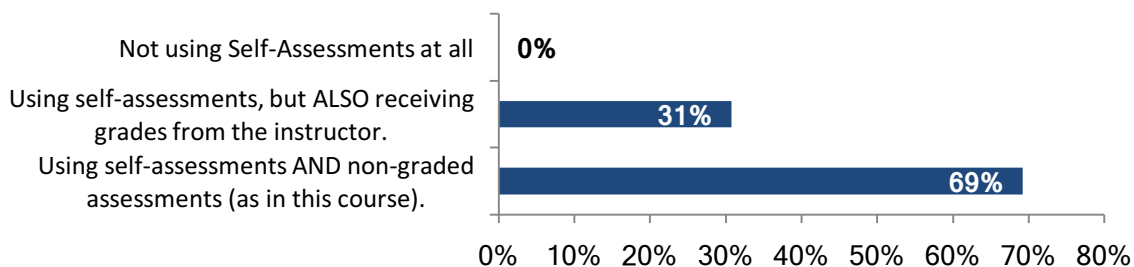
Question
Receiving feedback on my papers (but no grade)...
Q1 contributed positively to my learning in this course
Q2 helped to increase my understanding of philosophical concepts
Q3 helped me to develop my skills in critical writing
Q4 helped me to develop my ability to assess and critique philosophical questions and problems
Q5 increased my feelings of confidence about the material
Q6 increased my interest in philosophy
Q7 led me to take more intellectual risks in my writing
Q8 should be used in more courses at Wellesley
Self-Assessment...
Q9 contributed positively to my learning in this course
Q10 helped to increase my understanding of philosophical concepts
Q11 helped me to develop my skills in critical writing
Q12 helped me to develop my ability to assess and critique philosophical questions and problems
Q13 increased my feelings of confidence about the material
Q14 increased my interest in philosophy
Q15 led me to take more intellectual risks in my writing
Q16 should be used in more courses at Wellesley

Scale
1 Strongly Disagree
2 Somewhat Disagree
3 Neither agree nor disagree
4 Somewhat Agree
5 Strongly Agree

Phil 234 – Student Ratings of Self-Assessment and Receiving Feedback without Grades, N = 13



**If given the choice, which of the following options would you prefer?**



## Heat Map of Student Responses – Phil/ES 234

This figure displays all student responses, with each row representing a single student's responses. Each column is a separate question. Green represents favorable ratings, red less favorable (see scale below).

	Receiving feedback on my papers (but no grade)								Self-Assessment							
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16
Student	4	3	4	3	2	2	2	1	3	3	4	3	2	3	2	1
Student	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4
Student	4	2	4	5	4	2	4	3	4	3	5	5	4	2	4	4
Student	4	4	5	4	2	3	3	4	4	3	5	4	3	3	4	4
Student	4	4	4	4	3	3	5	5	4	3	5	4	3	3	4	5
Student	4	4	5	5	4	3	5	5	5	4	3	3	4	4	3	4
Student	4	5	5	4	5	3	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	3	5	4
Student	5	5	5	5	4	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	3	3	4	5
Student	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5
Student	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	4
Student	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Student	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Student	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

	Question
	Receiving feedback on my papers (but no grade)...
Q1	contributed positively to my learning in this course
Q2	helped to increase my understanding of philosophical concepts
Q3	helped me to develop my skills in critical writing
Q4	helped me to develop my ability to assess and critique philosophical questions and problems
Q5	increased my feelings of confidence about the material
Q6	increased my interest in philosophy
Q7	led me to take more intellectual risks in my writing
Q8	should be used in more courses at Wellesley
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Q9	contributed positively to my learning in this course
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Q12	helped me to develop my ability to assess and critique philosophical questions and problems
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Q14	increased my interest in philosophy
Q15	led me to take more intellectual risks in my writing
Q16	should be used in more courses at Wellesley

Scale	
1	Strongly Disagree
2	Somewhat Disagree
3	Neither agree nor disagree
4	Somewhat Agree
5	Strongly Agree

Phil 203 and Phil/ES234 – Combined Average and Class Averages

