

Teaching Statement

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My starting conviction as a teacher of philosophy is that *philosophy is for everyone*. Philosophy is the wellspring of all the specific forms of curiosity, and its cultivation is the birthright and responsibility of the citizenry of democracies. While not every question that excites interest in professional philosophers will excite interest in those outside the discipline, I believe that most philosophical questions can be connected, via a few short steps, to matters that *do* excite widespread interest (and where the connection cannot be drawn, philosophy has begun to lose its existential moorings). It is the job of a philosophy teacher to actualize this populist ideal—to *render* philosophy available for everyone.

I have been given several opportunities to teach my own courses at Indiana University. Here's how I've come to structure a typical class session. I begin with a brief reading quiz. Next, I remind my students where we are in the narrative of the course and quickly recap recent material. (Often I will invite students to supply such a recap.) As I begin lecturing, I employ a media presentation or handout as a continual reminder of the background for the days' content and as a way of communicating illustrative quotations and examples. Along the way, I pause to ask questions, e.g. whether and why students find a claim plausible, how a passage in a text ought to be understood, what examples can illustrate the point under discussion, etc. Sometimes I direct these questions to the whole class. Other times I ask students to jot down a response and compare it with another student before sharing with the whole class. I try to reach some sort of culminating or synthesizing thought by the end of the class period, and then hint at where our discussion will proceed in the next meeting.

I tell my students that teaching is for me a *relational activity*: I learn my students' names during the first week of class, I do my best to respond to the idiosyncratic learning styles of each group of students, I make myself available to meet with them (one on one as well as en masse before each exam). I tell them, also, that I have high expectations for them: that they attend consistently, that they complete all assigned readings, and that they be fully attentive during class sessions. I do not allow the use of laptops or mobile phones during my classes (though I might re-consider the policy for upper-division courses). Where space has allowed, I have often arranged classroom seating in a circle, so as to minimize the contrast in participation between "front row" students and "back row" students. Though some students find these constraints initially frustrating, I have seen many of these same students' participation steadily increase in quality and quantity throughout the term.

While I do not think there is any linear introductory path into philosophy (or as P.F. Strawson observed, "There is no shallow end to the philosophy pool"), there is a lot that I can do as an educator to present material in such a way that it is *motivated* and *accessible*.

Motivating a philosophical question amounts to getting students to see why anyone ought to spend time on it as opposed to spending time on a different question, or as opposed to spending time on a different type of pursuit altogether. To this end, I try to locate philosophical questions *within a historical and systematic context*. For example, I structure my Intro course around Aristotle's comprehensive philosophical system (viz., how he uses teleology to build a metaphysics, an epistemology, and a system of ethics), and then move on to some attempts in the early modern period to build anti-Aristotelian alternative frameworks. While freshman non-majors certainly find it challenging to work through

excerpts of Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Hume and others, I have found that, for purposes of motivating the philosophical controversies of any age, there is no substitute for a lucidly told intellectual history. (I begin the course with the early Socratic dialogues—comparatively approachable texts that motivate the philosophical enterprise if anything can.) At the same time, I try to show how philosophical questions are *relevant to contemporary life*. For example, I note the way that differing conceptions of flourishing human nature (i.e., precisely what is of such concern to Aristotle) inform how we think about clinical psychology today. In my critical thinking course, I highlight the ways that current political controversies can be clarified by careful argumentation and distorted by fallacious argumentation.

Accessibility of a philosophical question is a matter, first, of clear and vivid exposition, and second, of opportunities for students to ask questions and make suggestions out of their own experience. The former element of accessibility is, I think, my greatest strength in teaching: I work hard to explain material in ways that students understand, and when an explanation does not seem to be working, I solicit questions and then try to find a new vocabulary, metaphor or starting point. The latter element—starting from students' experience—remains an area of growth and experiment for me. I think there is an art to guiding a genuinely organic class discussion toward philosophical insights. I am learning but have not mastered this art.

Indiana University uses student evaluations to increase accountability in its classrooms (as do most universities). I have found this mechanism very useful to my pedagogical development. Before handing out the evaluation forms, I tell my students that I request detailed feedback, both positive and negative. I have made a number of changes in my teaching as a result. For one thing, I discovered that my reading quizzes were too difficult (students who were giving the readings an honest still missed a lot of questions), so I simplified them. For another, I discovered that I was waiting too long between exams, so I added an additional exam to the schedule.

I regularly find my time in the classroom to be the most fulfilling hours of my week. Students have responded largely positively (and sometimes, glowingly) to my teaching. I have consistently succeeded in recruiting top-performing students as new majors or minors (an average of 2-3 per semester). It has been still more gratifying to see underperforming or disengaged students make breakthroughs and find personal connections with the material after meeting with me. I am convinced that philosophical education is not a tedious way for philosophers to make a living but rather one of the purist and most important expressions of philosophy itself.