

Teaching Statement

I take teaching to be one of the great privileges and joys of being an academic philosopher. Through teaching we get to engage with others who share similar interests or invite those who are just discovering what philosophy is all about to dig deeper. I believe that philosophy offers students the unique opportunity to think about and thoroughly engage with some of the central questions concerning us, such as questions about the good life, justice, freedom, knowledge and truth. At the same time I believe that one bears great responsibility in teaching philosophy, for as a teacher it is one's responsibility to enable students to participate and to feel encouraged to think along in the classroom. I have three central goals when teaching a seminar: to relate the material covered to everyday life, to break down any barriers that might prevent a stimulating and inclusive course atmosphere, and to encourage students to take on the questions and challenges with passion and rigor.

Philosophical debate can seem overly abstract and all too distant from the real world. Students sometimes wonder how the material they are reading is in any way related to their everyday life and the concerns that they have outside the classroom. Often, I try to respond to this by relating the material to examples from my own life, or to recast certain abstract claims and arguments in more approachable and real-world terms. In teaching ethics, for example, and discussing the problem of the amoralist and egoist, I talk about the 'moral asshole' who jumps the queue at a supermarket till, an all too familiar experience we all can easily relate to. Or, I get my students to think about organ markets when discussing versions of libertarianism. In addition, I encourage my students to think of examples from their own life. This has the effect that students see how doing philosophy is ultimately about tackling important questions that matter to us and that we care about in real life, rather than merely about posing ingenious intellectual puzzles in the classroom. I try to convey to them that the latter are primarily there to let us inquire the former.

Philosophy can sometimes seem to be an exercise for the privileged few, for those who are well spoken and quick on their feet. While I am keen to encourage highly motivated students and those who show clear philosophical talent, I aim to always create an environment of inclusivity and respect. For, it is only doing so, I believe, that one is able to create a stimulating and productive classroom atmosphere where students can engage with one another, flourish, and really bring philosophy to life. Moreover, I actually find that the more reserved students who might be hesitant to participate, especially in an environment that is geared towards the privileged few, are often the most deeply concerned with the issue at hand and those who more often than not make invaluable contributions to the discussion. As such, it is of utmost importance to me to especially encourage those who at first shy away or are hesitant to participate to actively engage in classroom discussion. I emphasize to my students that philosophy is a collaborative enterprise rather than a contest. As such, I often find it helpful to incorporate various discussion formats that encourage participation, e.g. teaming-up students in pairs to share their ideas and arguments before briefly sharing their results with their fellow students in the seminar.

Philosophy can be really hard and it is easy for students to get discouraged from time to time. I try to tackle this problem by inviting students to at all times inquire, ask questions and raise any troubles they have, and to subsequently treat those inquiries, questions and worries seriously and with a sense of humility. While it is certainly the responsibility of a teacher to identify mistakes and to correct them, I try to treat those cases not as an occasion for embarrassment and ridicule, but instead as an opportunity to learn and to further sharpen my students' philosophical toolbox. Thus, I always try to focus on what's valuable and interesting in a student's contribution rather than merely pointing out their mistake. I have found it often very helpful to regularly assign short writing assignments, which allow me to give individual feedback as great opportunities for students to improve clear and structured thinking and argumentation.