

Teaching Statement

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As a teacher of philosophy, my basic aim is to foster genuine philosophical engagement, such that my students don't simply learn about philosophy but really do it themselves. I do this by (1) creating engaging course content, (2) providing my students with the tools to critically engage with primary texts through their written assignments, (3) creating an inclusive classroom environment where they can productively engage in philosophical conversation with one another, and (4) opening myself up to my students as someone with whom they can engage.

Finding ways to make philosophical problems feel relevant to actual life is always at the forefront of my mind in constructing my own courses. For instance, one of the courses I designed and taught at University of Chicago, which I hope to teach again soon, is a course called *Philosophy and Science Fiction*. The course is structured by four different science fiction films, each portraying a different philosophical theme. The first theme of the course is skepticism about the external world, as made vivid by the movie *The Matrix*. In watching this movie, one can readily imagine oneself as being in the situation of Neo, confronted with the opportunity to take the red pill and find out that the world one takes to be real is not, in fact, the real world. Could Neo's situation be our own? If it is, should we take the red pill, or take the blue pill and remain blissfully ignorant? Most of the students came into this course with little to no prior exposure to philosophy, and, yet, watching science fiction films such *The Matrix* immediately prompted thoughts regarding classical philosophical problems that we were then able to pursue in the classes that followed, reading and discussing classic historical and contemporary texts that dealt with these problems, such as Descartes's *Meditations* and Nozick's discussion of the experience machine. In addition to making philosophical issues feel relevant in determining course content, when teaching contemporary philosophers, I like to include links to interviews with these philosophers, where they not only discuss their position on philosophical issues, but, more importantly, why they think these issues matter.

Getting my students to feel gripped by philosophical issues is, I believe, the first step in getting them to do philosophy. However, writing is the main medium in which philosophy is done, and a principal aim of my courses is to bring my students to the point where they are able to do philosophy themselves in this medium, critically reconstructing philosophical arguments in their writing and articulating arguments of their own in response. I've found that there are two kinds of reactions to this task that beginning philosophy students tend to have: there are those for whom this task seems terribly daunting and are struck with a kind of paralysis at the prospect of engaging with a great historical philosopher, and there are those who want to immediately refute every philosopher we read in the course with the first thought that comes to mind. To respond to both of these extremes, I make it clear to my students that I see their writing assignments primarily as a means for them to understand the issue a philosopher is dealing with by thinking through that issue themselves in their writing. In teaching *Philosophical Perspectives*, I assign a four-page essay every two weeks so that students practice philosophical writing, and I require that the first essay consist solely in reconstructing a specific argument from one of the readings

and further supporting it with one's own reasoning, either substantiating an unargued-for premise or responding to a potential counter-argument. For students of the first sort, this takes off much of the burden of feeling like they must have some totally novel response to a great philosopher. For students of the second sort, this slows them down and gets them to charitably interpret a philosopher who they would otherwise attempt to hastily refute. I've found that once students are able to charitably reconstruct a philosopher's position, the task of responding to it with an argument of their own (one which actually makes traction with that original argument) almost always comes naturally.

Another aspect of the practice of philosophy that I emphasize in my teaching is discussion with one's peers. I did my undergraduate at New College of Florida, a tiny liberal arts school in Sarasota Florida, and all of the courses there were small, discussion-based seminars. The ability to discuss philosophical issues with my peers was invaluable to my undergraduate education, and it's extremely important to me that I foster a classroom environment where all students feel able and welcome to engage in philosophical discussion with one another. To structure and stimulate class discussion, I have my students submit weekly discussion questions concerning the week's reading the day before class. I make sure that students understand that these are low pressure assignments, and I'm not grading them on content. Rather, I use them to get a sense of what students are most interested in talking about and to facilitate discussion among students who might otherwise not be as inclined to participate. Before class, I organize the discussion questions into the handout that I use to structure the class. I generally split the class into several segments, in which I first provide an exposition of one of the philosophical issues discussed in the reading and we then engage in discussion about that issue, using one or more of the students' discussion posts on this issue as a jumping-off point. In addition to providing structure to class discussion, I've found that this can function to bring different voices into the discussion rather than having just a few students dominate, which will often tend to be the case if no structure is imposed. Often, it just takes the initial encouragement in order for someone to become a regular participant in class discussions.

In addition to facilitating discussions among my students on philosophical issues, I also make myself available to them as a conversational partner. Whether it is in class, in commenting on papers, or in one-on-one meetings, I take my role as an interlocutor to be twofold: first, to help students get their thoughts on the table, drawing distinctions and articulating concepts that might be helpful so that they are better able to articulate their thoughts themselves, and, second, to challenge preconceptions that students might have, asking probing questions to get them to consider how someone might respond to their claims. I encourage my students to meet with me in office hours to discuss the ideas of the authors we're reading in the class, the ideas that they're working on themselves in their papers, and any philosophical issues beyond the course material that they've gotten interested in. In all of my meetings with students, I offer my expertise in any way I can, while nevertheless treating them as I would a peer. Outside of my official duties as an instructor, I've worked to establish philosophical community with my students at University of Chicago, for instance, leading an undergraduate reading group on Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit*, and attending the undergraduate philosophy club both to give presentations of my own work and to comment on presentations of undergraduate students. As a result these efforts, I've had many students with whom I've continued

meeting with, exchanging emails, and giving feedback on papers long after a course in which I've taught them and, in several cases, after they graduated.