

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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I think the best favor I can do for my students in a philosophy class is to make them question beliefs that they have never before questioned. If I can sow doubt where there once was certainty, and show that many issues that look obvious are on second glance quite complicated, then I've started them thinking about how to resolve those doubts. They will then almost automatically find themselves in the game of giving *reasons* for what they believe. And that, I think, is the goal of most philosophical teaching.

This is a difficult goal, since (as we all know) currently held beliefs and modes of thinking are much more comfortable than novel ones. The best way I've found to meet this challenge is through demanding *engagement* from my students. If they treat my class as a place for passive reception of philosophical ideas, then it will be only an exercise for them of remembering which crazy philosopher thought what crazy thing. The material can end up filed away in an intellectual vault, safely isolated from the student's own deepest convictions, and only dredged up later for cocktail parties. If, on the other hand, I can get them to toy with the ideas "online", and to think themselves—even experimentally—along the same unusual lines as those philosophers, then I think they've really learned how to *do* something of use: to think in new and more reasoned ways.

My first main tactic for engaging my students is to make the classroom a comfortable place for interaction. I design icebreakers for the first day so that each student gets used to speaking in class. As often as possible, I ask provocative questions and wait for responses, rather than preach the standard answer. I am constantly demanding questions and comments from my students. I keep my lectures flexible enough to follow the genuine interests of the students where I can. This flexibility is all the easier due to my training in theatrical improvisation, which also helps keep the material fresh and entertaining. Laughter is common, but so is earnest debate, and often both at once. Throughout, I exhibit my own sincere enthusiasm for the issues—I find this makes students less shy about being interested themselves. Perhaps most importantly, I show my genuine interest in and respect for the students and their ideas. As a result, my classes consistently foster active discussion.

My second tactic for engaging students is to motivate the abstract philosophical problems at hand. My introductory syllabus, for example, starts with crime and the justification of punishment. Whether to be "soft" or "hard" on criminals is a real-world issue that engages students immediately. This topic then serves as a springboard for the rest of the course. It first motivates the study of ethics, especially since standard theories of punishment line up neatly into utilitarian and deontological camps. From

there it is a natural segue to moral responsibility and free will, and then from there to the mind-body problem. Throughout I pressure them to develop a consistent stance across the suite of topics. By the time we start studying epistemology, the students are in enough doubt to see the the point to a general study of knowledge.

My third tactic for engagement involves innovative use of technology. Instead of writing notes on a blackboard, for example, I now write them in an HTML composer that is projected onto a screen. This “virtual blackboard” allows me to post the notes on the web later, and that in turn allows the students to focus on the material at hand instead of jotting down definitions. I find this method is more flexible than handouts, because it allows me to follow students’ interests and questions on the fly. But it is also more structured (and legible!) than blackboard notes. This technique has proven very popular with students. I am also an “early adopter” of technological tools like the Moodle course management software, and David Velleman’s online logic text *Blogic*.¹

Fourth, I design paper assignments in a way that demands of them to pick a contentious philosophical topic and write on *both* sides of the issue as sympathetically as possible. In this way I guarantee that every student who passes my class has at least toyed with arguments that do not come naturally to them.

Finally, I constantly look to improve my teaching. I take evaluations and feedback very seriously. Through the years I’ve worked closely with Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. They have consulted with me individually about my classes, and I have worked with them to develop and present seminars for new graduate student instructors on topics like learning disabilities and diversity.

Teaching is a joy for me. (Okay: *except* the grading.) Seeing the amazement on a student’s face as the penny drops for the first time about some philosophical topic, I’m reminded of why I study this material myself. It’s very like seeing your hometown fresh again through a visitor’s eyes. This genuine pleasure, perhaps, is my most effective tool for engaging the students.

¹See <http://moodle.org> and <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/velleman/blogic/>, respectively.