

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Enthusiasm and Optimism

“Astonishing! Everything is intelligent!” –Pythagoras

While Pythagoras was making a panpsychic announcement with this oft-quoted exclamation, it has long triggered a second, more personal revelation for me: my enduring faith in the worthiness of helping students recognize and develop their own intellectual potential. My students have often characterized me as “enthusiastic.” They know that when I am in the classroom, or otherwise interacting with them, I am willingly and entirely there for them. They know that I love what I do. They know that it genuinely matters to me whether or not they gain something useful from their educational experience.

A student once described my method of conveying a new concept or analytical technique along the lines of “making it seem like we already knew it the whole time.” Not only do I care about my students’ well-being, I respect them. I find it healthy for a teacher to be incurably optimistic about the potential of her students to achieve excellence. Pessimistic or cynical preconceptions regarding student interest or capacity for learning are nonproductive and further, generally untrue. Students deserve and need an instructor who is willing to teach students with different capabilities, learning styles, objectives and backgrounds.

Content and Organization

In addition to enthusiasm about teaching, students further need from an instructor substantive content presented in an organized, coherent fashion. Enthusiasm without substance might make for an entertaining class experience, but it would be a wasted opportunity in terms of learning. Students should be able to walk away with something to show from their time in a course—knowledge, a new skill set, or at the very least an appreciation for something theretofore unknown to them.

So I take considerable care in selecting not only the content but also the organization of my courses. Discussion subjects, vocabulary, history, methods, problems, etc., need to be presented in a coherent way, with a flow from one subject to the next and some sense of overall connection, to better enable a student’s understanding of the big picture.

Trust is important in the classroom. Students need to be able to trust, for example, that their work will be evaluated fairly and reasonably. While some of my in-class exercises and credit opportunities are unconventional, my evaluation tools (e.g., exams) and grading system are traditional. Students also need to trust that what they are told about the requirements and expectations for a course is accurate and not subject to frequent or sudden change. I create clear, detailed syllabi and course schedules for my students so that there is no guesswork regarding the

guidelines or expectations. My students know how to contact me outside of class and that I heartily encourage them to do so when they need individual help or have questions.

Methodology

Philosophical ideas do not arise *ex nihilo* nor do they exist in a vacuum. The context in which an idea or entire system of thought arises is relevant to understanding that idea or system. This does not mean simply invoking the biographies of philosophers; it rather means that in teaching philosophical ideas, their cultural, social and political context must be kept in mind.

The best thing that I can do for undergraduates introduced to philosophy for the first time is to demonstrate that in both content and method, it is by and large useful, interesting and even important for us to grasp certain philosophical basics so that we are better prepared to understand and contribute meaningfully to the world in which we live. Sometimes this may require bringing John Stuart Mill and Jon Stewart into the same conversation, or else demonstrating the fundamentals of Boolean logic in electronic information search environments. It consistently involves selling students on the idea that being able to think critically, make decisions rationally and express oneself clearly are desirable and reasonably attainable goals.

I have had success with unconventional teaching methods, such as in-class competitions modeled after game shows to develop logical and critical thinking skills. I have also had positive results from more conventional methods, such as directing advanced students to keep commonplace books to record their ideas, questions and observations related to the course material and whatsoever they are subsequently led to ponder upon. Encouraging a combination of inquisitiveness, critical analysis and creativity of thought I believe is integral to developing a well-rounded student of philosophy.

For more advanced undergraduates, who have already been convinced to some degree of the worthiness of studying philosophy, it becomes more important for me to help guide them through each new territory of discussion (the plains of Plato or the boot hills of Buddhism, for example), teaching them something of the *sittlichkeit* (to borrow Hegel's term) or customs, conventions, norms, etc. that are *apropos* to the material under discussion so that they have its contextual location. For topics courses, especially, this best includes presenting as balanced a global perspective as possible. Once this foundation is in place, my role is then to encourage and train my students to make their own observations, raise their own questions and derive their own informed, reasoned conclusions.

Pedagogical Growth

It is my hope that I will always continue to learn something over the duration of a course as well as my students. This seems especially important for a discipline like philosophy in which, I believe, the Socratic method of guiding students through their own reflections and arguments is one of the very best approaches. It is an approach that should, from time to time, surprise the guide as well as the guided.