

## Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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A student recently described my method of conveying a complex concept as my "making it seem like we already knew it the whole time." I find it useful to adopt the attitude that most students have some base-level knowledge (or at least, an intuition) of certain important philosophical ideas already, if not knowledge of the names or finer points of analysis of those ideas. My job is precisely about providing students with the vocabulary for discussing those ideas, the tools for analyzing them, and details of some of the great conversations concerning them. This does not preclude the additional assumption that, if I am doing my job correctly, I will also succeed in surprising them with the introduction of ideas that are entirely novel to them. Regularly re-affirming the lesson that there is always more to learn is equally as important as affirming their capacity for pursuing and attaining such knowledge. There is nothing wrong in hearing from a bemused student, "I think you just broke my brain, but in a good way."

I find it healthy for a teacher to be optimistic about the potential of her students. Pessimistic or cynical preconceptions regarding student interest or capacity for learning are nonproductive and further, generally untrue. However, I do not mean that being optimistic about their potential for success is to be willfully blind to the challenges that students may face in trying to achieve that success. Some students have specific learning disabilities, or have been inadequately prepared for college coursework, or face the challenge of taking a course in a language which they are still learning, or face chronic medical conditions, or must manage a family and a job in addition to their studies. Students deserve and need an instructor who is willing to teach students with different capabilities, learning styles, objectives and backgrounds. I strive to deliver this kind of instruction.

I believe that the best thing that I can do for my students is to demonstrate that it is useful, interesting, and even intrinsically valuable for us to grasp certain perpetually profound and sometimes troubling questions that arise through introspection, reflection and observation, and to comprehend both the possible limits and the possible limitlessness of our capacity for answering them. In so doing, we become not only better prepared to understand and contribute meaningfully to the world in which we live, but are better prepared as thoughtful human beings to *live*, period.

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, in order to underscore the relevance of certain material. In any event, it consistently involves selling students on the idea that being able to think critically, make decisions rationally and express themselves clearly are desirable and reasonably attainable goals. Fortunately, many students enter class with exactly this expectation.

In addition to enthusiasm about teaching, students 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— new knowledge, a new skill set, or at the very least an appreciation for something theretofore unknown to them. So I take considerable care not only in selecting the content for but also in the organization of my courses. I create clear, detailed syllabi and course schedules for my students so that there is no guesswork regarding the guidelines or expectations. I strive to present discussion subjects, vocabulary, history, methods, and problems in a coherent way, with a recognizable flow from one subject to the next and some sense of overall connection, to better enable a student's understanding

of the big picture. Enabling their capacity for big-picture thinking is one of my primary goals in any class that I teach. If the overall structure makes sense, then it is much more manageable for a student to grasp details and understand their relationship of those details within that structure.

I embrace the opportunity to make use of both new and established learning technologies to improve the course experience, e.g., by facilitating the delivery of educational content and fostering communication with and among my students. At minimum, I make use of web sites to provide access to course materials; I write detailed summaries to supplement text readings and lectures, as well as facilitate review for exams. Whenever available, I take advantage of course software such as Blackboard to enable online submission of assignments, individual student access to grades, and the exchange of ideas through topical discussion boards tied explicitly to course assignments.

I employ a number of ungraded, “credit only” assignments to foster participation and build confidence in students before they are tasked with the more traditional, graded portions of the course. I have had tremendous success with “mock quizzes,” ungraded exercises that give students an opportunity to check their progress in comprehending the material and ask questions where needed, and which provides them with a preview of the sort of questions they could expect on an exam. I have also had good results with credit-only “reaction essays,” informal assignments that allow students to practice expressing their thoughts and formulating their arguments before they are asked to apply those skills to a graded term paper.

Other unconventional methods, such as in-class competitions modeled after games shows (e.g., the “Battle of the Logicians” and the enduring favorite, “Fallacy Feud”) allow students to develop confidence and a sense of fun even with material that may otherwise seem dry or difficult. Other hands-on methods of tackling the material are often not humorous, but still succeed in being engaging, such as placing ethics students into selection committees charged with allocating, under strict time restraints, an insufficient number of ventilators among a list of fictional patients in a worst-case pandemic scenario. The impression such exercises makes upon them, based on what they report to me, can be profound.

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Students know, as a rule, when an instructor wants to be there with them. They know when that instructor cares about the subject matter she is teaching. They know whether or not she cares if they learn something of value and if they develop as scholars. Students know when an instructor has that propriety feeling which signifies her investment in what she is doing— her belief that what she is doing matters, and that those for whom she is doing it matters. And this in turn matters very much, as a rule, to students.

My students know that they are getting in me such an invested teacher, someone who believes not only that our efforts together in a course are worthwhile, but that the process can also be enjoyable and occasionally quite marvelous. In this, I find tremendous satisfaction and I believe that, to varying extents, the same can be said of my students.

I can not imagine going about the matter of teaching in any other way. The core of my view about the appropriate approach to teaching may be summarized in this way: “Do it the utmost of your ability, because of course, *of course* it matters.”