

Teaching Statement

Teaching philosophy has, for me, three core elements: substance, method and the philosophical mindset. All three raise distinct but related pedagogical challenges.

The substantive challenge is to communicate complex ideas in a form that retains their seriousness while illuminating their vibrancy. With this in mind, I try to bring out the visceral urgency of apparently abstruse philosophical problems by linking them to my students' more immediate experiences and concerns, for example situating Spinoza's substance monism in the context of more familiar claims in ecology and modern physics about the interrelatedness and unity of apparently distinct and disparate phenomena. The distinctive challenge when teaching political philosophy is that key claims regarding, say, the legitimacy of state authority are widely taken for granted. I try to make these issues more vivid using historical and contemporary examples and by drawing on the immediate institutional context of the lesson.

The methodological challenge concerns the specific mode of analysis and argumentation involved in the academic discipline of philosophy. I draw upon my own experiences as an undergraduate in order to effectively communicate the peculiarly liberating constraints of the analytic method, which can be especially off-putting for students new to philosophy, whose enthusiasm for abstraction can crumble in the face of the demands of clarity and rigor. On the other hand, inexperienced students can also slip into the trap of thinking that stating premises and using formal locutions is all there is to philosophical writing and argumentation. The pedagogical challenge, as I see it, is to show that the analytic method is a tool that can be used well or badly but which must be mastered before it can be used at all.

A related challenge concerns the importance of writing and re-writing. It is hard to come to terms with the fact that good philosophical writing is rarely a quick or a solitary process. The process of sharing flawed drafts and then re-writing arguments, should, ideally, become habitual, so that students are comfortable trying out difficult ideas and arguments. Useful techniques include the use of iterative assignments in which later work can utilize and build upon revisions of earlier efforts and having students present paper topics for discussion and comment.

The third challenge concerns what it means to do philosophy or be a philosopher. Here the problem is not what to think or how to argue, but how to relate to the world. One of my central goals as a teacher is to communicate the idea that philosophy is a distinctive way of life, a way of being in the world rather than just a subject to study in school or a marketable skill. Philosophy is a name we give to questions we must ask but cannot definitively answer; it requires us to think with critical detachment about our deepest assumptions and commitments while also being open to and immersed in the widest possible range of human experience and knowledge.

The openness of philosophical enquiry stands in necessary and, ideally, productive tension with the authority and expertise of the teacher. The challenge is to use this pedagogical authority to communicate the idea that philosophy can and should be an egalitarian and democratic practice of free and open-ended argument. I try to develop a relaxed and friendly rapport with my students in order to foster the bond of mutual respect and trust that is essential to successful teaching. One way of developing openness and respect in the classroom is the occasional use of anonymous feedback exercises, which demonstrate my openness to critique and respect for students' opinions, as well as giving me the opportunity to make adjustments from lesson to lesson when possible.

My approach is reflected in the three courses I have designed. The first takes a multi-faceted approach to democratic theory, building from methodological foundations through normative theory to practical applications. This allows students to develop a critical understanding of the relationships between abstract accounts of democratic ideals to urgent political issues. The second is an introductory survey of social theory and the philosophy of social science, ranging from Plato and Hobbes through Durkheim and Wilson to Horkheimer and Rawls. I adopted a broader conception of social theory than is usually taught, for example, in sociology or literature departments, in order to interrogate the extent to which the methods and core concerns of various disciplines of the humanities and the human and social sciences complement or are in tension with each other. The third is a survey of modern western political theory, in which, I juxtapose classic works on social order and authority by Rousseau and Mill with a range of radical critiques of liberalism, capitalism, the state and patriarchy.

To conclude, communicating and exploring philosophical ideas is central to philosophical enquiry. Classroom teaching is an important venue for the exploration and clarification of my own philosophical views, but more importantly, it is a chance to share with others the invigorating aporia and fragments of clarity that philosophical enquiry can bring and to help students focus critical attention on their most basic values and assumptions. Just as philosophical enquiry is never definitively complete, so the practice of teaching remains subject to re-imagination and revision. I relish the opportunity to further develop my pedagogical practice.