

Teaching Statement

Philosophical inquiry can be intimidating for students, at least in part because of its frequently abstract nature. I encourage my students to view philosophical abstraction from a standpoint once articulated by Wilfrid Sellars, according to which our project “is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”. Philosophical inquiry, in its best light, expresses a desire for far-reaching syntheses of understanding. My pedagogy reflects this desire, even though I acknowledge that students make philosophical progress slowly and incrementally.

I believe that one way to guide students into a philosophical frame of mind, and to train them to become genuine interlocutors on difficult philosophical questions, is to treat them as one’s interlocutors from the very beginning. This communicates a certain expectation, but also a certain respect. One does not need to be paternalistic in one’s pedagogy if one’s students already have the sense that they are able participants to the conversation. I cultivate this welcome atmosphere both inside and outside the classroom through a combination of assignments, teaching styles, and a personal demeanor that is (I hope!) equal parts empathetic and enthusiastic.

Outside the classroom, my syllabi tend to maximize students’ opportunities for creative, autonomous, philosophical writing. For example, many of my courses include small “reflection piece” assignments. The first goal of these pieces is to give students experience with low-stakes philosophical writing, thus serving as an effective precursor to writing standard, longer philosophical papers. The second goal is to signal to students that philosophy is a freely undertaken pursuit, and that I trust their abilities enough to let their own intellectual curiosities guide them. To these ends, the reflection pieces are deliberately open-ended in multiple respects. First, they are open-ended with respect to which philosophical materials students are allowed to write about. This enables them to exercise their own intellectual agency by targeting whatever is of most interest to them from the course readings. Second, these reflections are open-ended with respect to the ways in which they advance philosophical conversations. I thus provide students with a roadmap for crafting reflection pieces of different genres, not all of which require them to follow the standard model of identifying a flaw in a philosophical argument.¹

Inside the classroom, my teaching style combines a strong performative element with a careful eye for maintaining students’ attention. It is difficult for anyone to focus carefully on complex philosophical materials for long stretches of time, and I pay mind to this fact when I teach. My lectures are frequently interspersed with opportunities for students to consider one another’s voices on philosophical issues, thus allowing their eyes and ears to wander away from the front of the lecture hall, albeit in a structured way. I also add “brain cleanser moments” to my lectures at strategic intervals. These can range from deliberately corny philosophical jokes (such as a video in which I claim to be sampling a fast-food item from within Robert Nozick’s experience machine) to photos of my sister’s cat Timothy that have no philosophical content whatsoever.² These moments usually come after especially difficult confrontations with a text. They have the profound effect of enabling students to maintain far greater focus throughout these difficult moments, since they know that their attention will be rewarded with appropriate breaks. These are also opportunities for me to demonstrate my respect for their time and energy.

¹ See Appendix A of my teaching dossier for the reflection piece instruction guide that I provide for my students.

² One philosophical exception: a staged photo in which Timothy is playing with a calculator, to which I make the (facetious) claim that the photo is evidence that Timothy’s cognition extends into the world beyond his body, in the manner proposed by Andy Clark and David Chalmers in their piece “The Extended Mind”.

Part of what it takes to treat students as philosophical inquirers is to provide them with ample opportunities for input into their own learning processes. Thus, at the mid-semester point, my students complete a “start, stop, continue” exercise in which I invite them to anonymously submit feedback concerning what I should start doing, stop doing, and continue doing for the remainder of the term. This demonstrates that I am interested in their feedback *as I teach them*, not just after their end-of-term evaluations have been completed. Relatedly, I often reserve at least one class for a “student’s choice” reading, based on a curated list of options from which the students collectively choose. Depending on their choices, this also provides me with insight into whether certain course themes were under-represented or over-represented.

Finally, during the final class of the semester, I now ask my students to complete a pass/fail “retrospection exercise” in which they are invited to answer a series of questions about the course, my pedagogy, and their own efforts, each of which is unlikely to be found on standard institutional teaching evaluations. For example, I ask my students:

- 1) If you strongly disliked an assignment in this class, what would you replace it with?
- 2) What is one thing you wish I kept in mind while teaching you or, while evaluating your work?
- 3) What is one thing *you* could have done better in your approach to this course?³

Looking to the future, I am conscious of our discipline’s need to continuously envision new entry points for students. My view is that current issues in social epistemology have a strong tendency to draw attention from those who are otherwise on the fence about pursuing philosophy. In past courses, my students and I have discussed how structural features of the internet can encourage political polarization and the spread of misinformation. These themes will also carry over to sections of my forthcoming course, *The Ethics of Belief*, at Ashoka University in 2023. Similarly, in my recently conducted course *Climate Change: Ethical and Political Issues* (2021), I discussed some of the epistemic habits that lead to climate science skepticism and denialism. Undergraduate students are generally hungry for opportunities to strategize about having hard conversations with family members during holidays, and I am gearing many of my syllabi toward satiating this need as I continue forward in my career.

Studying philosophy can be life-changing in several ways. Some are tied to the content of philosophical debates, while others are tied to the deeply satisfying process of learning to clarify and precisify one’s own thinking, no matter the topic. Philosophy provides tools for critical reasoning and reflection that can be applied far beyond an academic career, and even far beyond the confines of one’s private thinking. My teaching career has cemented my commitment to helping students become better *doers* in the world, over and above helping them to become clearer and more charitable thinkers.

³ The complete list of questions is contained in Appendix B of my complete teaching dossier.