

Teaching Statement

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Students tend to take philosophy classes because of their curiosity about ‘big questions’. Students are less likely to come seeing the point of disciplined, rigorous inquiry into such questions. The slow, detailed analysis that those of us in the profession engage in often seems pointless and tedious to them. The challenge for their teachers, then, is to keep the students’ curiosity alive—even better, to extend it to questions to which the students have yet to give thought—while pulling them away from the mere facile statement of opinions and pushing them to careful, sustained, and disciplined reflection.

Getting students to engage in disciplined reflection is made easier to the extent that the students are convinced that such discipline has a point. Whenever I have occasion to point out how a small difference in one premise leads to a completely different conclusion, I make use of the occasion. Here are a few other points that I like to make in order to lead students to realize the importance of rigorous attention to detail:

- I like to compare making deductive arguments to solving math problems. Most students recognize the importance of getting things precisely right in math; they recognize that even a small error in the course of solving a problem can lead to wildly incorrect results at the end. Deductive arguments are susceptible to the same danger.
- With inductive arguments the danger in hastiness is that one will omit a bit of information that will cast all the other evidence under a different light. For example, if a piece of the cake on the table is missing and there is a trail of crumbs leading upstairs to your younger brother’s room, you can reasonably infer that your younger brother helped himself to some cake. But should you find a note from your parents saying that a friend of theirs is staying in your younger brother’s room for a few nights, you might infer instead that you have a hungry and messy houseguest.
- I once had one especially forthright student complain in class that he couldn’t see the point of all the endless distinctions and counterexamples that philosophers make. Why couldn’t we just get on with addressing the questions with which we started? I made a few comments in immediate response but, on further reflection later in the day, I decided that a further apology was called for. So I started the next class period by presenting an ordinary medical scenario in which a patient tested positive for a fatal illness. I told the students about the test’s reliability, about the disease’s prevalence, and about a drug that cures the disease except in cases of fatal allergic reactions to the drug. I then asked the students to estimate the likelihood that the patient actually has the disease and to decide whether she should be given the drug. Only one student came anywhere close to giving the correct answer. I then gave a short spiel on how there are certain problems in which our quick and dirty judgements are almost guaranteed to be wrong and how the only way to get around these cognitive illusions is by careful, painstaking reasoning (in the medical case, by applying Bayes’ theorem). I chose to illustrate this by using a medical case because the practical consequences of making the wrong judgement are obvious, but I wanted to suggest to the students that philosophical problems also require careful, disciplined reasoning in order to give us reason to trust our conclusions.

One of my main goals as a teacher is to encourage students to reflect carefully on their beliefs both in light of their own other beliefs and in light of distinctions and objections that they first encounter

in the texts we read and in classroom discussion. I want to instill in them the habit of taking responsibility for their own intellectual development. One of the primary ways of accomplishing this is by emphasizing classroom discussions. I take questions and objections from students seriously and try to give them adequate responses (not so much by telling them what the answer is as by taking sufficient time to explore what might be said in response). Sometimes this means revisiting questions in subsequent class periods, if they weren't adequately dealt with the first time around.

I am also willing to encourage student discussion even at some expense to getting things right. That is, I will permit discussions to go on even if I think the putative problems rely on dubious assumptions; I will not always correct students when they make silly claims. There is a balance to be found here, of course, especially since I do not want to leave the more advanced students frustrated by too many discussions that they can immediately recognize as misguided. But I would rather try to get the more advanced students to provide corrections in the discussions than providing them myself. I want the students to take responsibility rather than falling into thinking of me as a source of spoonfed answers that they need to remember in order to get a good grade.

This sort of classroom dynamic does require that the students have done the assigned readings with some care. My primary means of encouraging that is to assign regular reading responses. I like to make these a bit more challenging than just asking them to raise a question about the text or to raise a putative objection (though even just requiring such simple responses can go a long way). A format I particularly like—and that the students seem to enjoy—is to ask the students to identify a claim in the text that strikes them as utterly crazy and misguided and then to explain what might be said on its behalf.¹ Is there a way of interpreting the claim such that it looks less crazy? Are there other commitments that lead the author to this claim? Completing exercises like this leaves the students in a much better position to contribute to classroom discussions.

Once a good classroom dynamic has developed, I will sometimes hand responsibility to the students explicitly by telling them at the beginning of class that they are to pretend that I am ignorant of the text under discussion and that it is their job to explain it to me, as well as to object if they think another student is explaining it incorrectly. This requires (i) that we have already covered enough material so that they have some idea what is going on and (ii) that they have done the readings with some care. It also requires a certain classroom dynamic that probably cannot be achieved with every group of students. But if the right conditions are in place, it can work very well in getting students to take initiative and try to work through problems themselves. I have been pleasantly surprised at how sophisticated even introductory students can be when they really get into the project of sorting through a text, figuring out what the interpretive options are and what should be said about the arguments being made.

¹I borrowed and adapted this idea from Jonathan E. Adler's 'Reading and Interpretation: A Heuristic for Improving Students' Comprehension of Philosophy Texts' (published in *Teaching Philosophy: Theoretical Reflections and Practical Suggestions*, ed. by Tziporah Kasachkoff [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998]).
