

Teaching Statement

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My educational goals for my students are to (1) promote understanding of philosophical theories, concepts, and arguments; (2) encourage philosophical engagement, including fruitful and constructive philosophical discussion and debate; and (3) foster excitement for philosophical investigation and inquiry, both academically and in everyday life. I hope to have achieved these goals in my teaching, and this Spring I was honored to receive the NYU College of Arts and Science's Outstanding Teaching Award, a student-nominated award given to between eight and twelve adjunct instructors and teaching-assistants each year. I ask much of my students: I try to teach them the joy—or, at least, the value—of philosophical frustration. I encourage them to use their confusion as a chance to investigate further, try to break a view they're struggling with down into smaller premises and claims that they *do* understand. I invite students to think about a philosophical theory or argument in terms of the “architecture” of its premises and commitments by pushing them into unfamiliar territory. For example, as a T.A. for Philosophy of Physics (Spring 2015) I challenged them think of how Aristotle, given his account of natural motion, would interpret pictures from the NASA's Curiosity rover of the planet Mars (the students eventually concluded that Aristotle would panic, since this giant ball, being made of rock, must be hurtling towards the Earth).

I strive to make examples as hands-on as possible, which isn't something normally associated with philosophy courses. In a class like philosophy of physics, there are so many opportunities to give students a chance to learn about a difficult concept with using something they can hold and examine in their own time. Just one example, I recently made use of a can of pringles to illustrate a cylindrical geometry: holding the can up to the board to demystify mathematical notions like a tangent plane, and distributing a chip to each student to help them visualize spacetime curvature. However, I think opportunities like these exist in many types of philosophy class.

An obstacle to fostering philosophical engagement, I've found, is that in-class discussion can often be dominated by a select few voices, usually students who are especially confident academically and/or socially. I would often encounter students

who barely ever spoke up in discussion, or would only do so reluctantly and unenthusiastically, yet were turning in some of the class's best and most insightful work. As someone who struggled with social anxiety, I understand those students who are interested in philosophy and in the course, but who feel like the in-class discussion is not a place for them. And I have experienced first-hand how, all too often, methods like cold-calling or even sometimes small group work can sometimes secure participation only at the expense of a student's comfort, and enthusiasm.

I countered this chilling effect by extending the notion of "participation" beyond the classroom, allowing it to include discussions after class and emails with me about the material. The response was far greater than I anticipated. I received many more emails than I ever had before, most asking substantive and difficult philosophical questions. Most strikingly, those students who consistently and enthusiastically participate using these alternative methods are precisely those who, in the first few weeks of the semester, were the least comfortable speaking up. And, as the course progressed, those students began to take more active roles in in-class discussions, once they saw that their questions and comments would be treated with respect and charity.

One-on-one engagement with students, and encouraging and guiding self-directed research and investigation needn't be limited to independent studies or honors theses.

In sum, my educational strategies aim to promote philosophical understanding, discussion, and engagement in and outside of the classroom. I am committed to maximizing inclusivity and accessibility in my teaching. This is an important step in fostering greater excitement for philosophical investigation, since effects like stereotype threat can interfere with a student's ability to see themselves as "the sort of person" who could do philosophy. Countering this phenomenon means our courses should represent a diversity in opinion as well as diversity in the sources of that opinion. This includes not just diversity in gender, race, and historical tradition, but also a diverse mix of historical and contemporary perspectives, even in courses that are (ostensibly) about only contemporary (or only historical) issues.