

Teaching Statement

I've seen some professors look upon teaching as an obligation that requires them to put their own intellectual development on hold, focusing instead on imparting static mastery over some canonical text or formal framework to the uninitiated. But I take my inspiration from the professors who do the opposite, approaching each course they teach as an opportunity to hone their command of the topics they care about. To date, I have taught a total of seven courses, and I cannot think of a single semester during which my understanding of the material I taught was not both problematized and deepened—even the fifth or sixth time teaching the same class. And that applies doubly for introductory courses. A text or topic may very well be familiar territory to me, but that doesn't mean that if all goes well, my students won't bring me to understand it from a new perspective. Furthermore, I would say that this principle applies whether or not I have designed the syllabus for the course I am teaching; even if I am teaching something designed in advance, I like to put special emphasis on the aspects of the texts or topics that I feel I need to understand better. The idea is to invite my students to join me as we negotiate these difficulties together.

The core of my pedagogy evolved between 2002 and 2007, before I began my graduate career in philosophy. Over that period I taught six undergraduate cinema studies courses at the University of Pittsburgh in a wide variety of subjects over thirteen semesters, all of my own design. One early sign that I needed to switch fields came when my faculty observers noted, 'This seems more like a philosophy class than a film class.' But I think that remark illustrates how similar my approach to teaching both kinds of course is—nearly everything I learned from that experience carries over into my philosophy courses. For instance, I make heavy use of illustrations and diagrams. In the cinema studies setting, this turned out to be the best way to teach what, for instance, Renaissance perspective is. But when I taught my upper-level seminar in the philosophy of language, I found that the very same method was effective for introducing students to the basics of mathematical proof: drawing a proof out diagrammatically shows them how it really works. The best way to introduce philosophy students to technical material, hands down, is by engaging their spatial cognitive faculties; doing so can turn an abstruse chain of technical reasoning into an argument that makes intuitive sense. But using pictures can be equally advantageous in less technical philosophy courses. I have found that it is surprisingly helpful, when constructing a thought experiment, simply to represent it pictorially, so that the students can devote all of the imaginative energy they would have been using to visualize the hypothetical scenario to instead determining what they think about it.

Also central to my experience in those years was having to motivate the material to students who weren't necessarily coming in with a strong interest in the subject. Many of them were there exclusively for the purposes of fulfilling their humanities requirement. Having come from an undergraduate environment where majors were motivated entirely by their passion for the field, I at first found this situation quite challenging. But after a while, I came to appreciate the process of reframing the content of my courses for skeptical listeners, who didn't even necessarily know they might find an introductory course in the humanities interesting at first. Winning such students over is immensely satisfying, and can be a way of unearthing hitherto undiscovered talent. And it had positive consequences for my teaching at the University of Chicago as well. One might think that teaching at a school comprised of endearingly proactive autodidacts demands a more sophisticated approach. To the contrary, I have found that the students at the University of Chicago respond very positively to course content that doesn't just help itself to the assumption that any topic it treats is automatically interesting or important.

A course that requires little of its students beyond a few tedious and stressful nights of preparation for a final exam tends to go in one ear and out the other; but a course that requires a student to work steadily over an entire semester will stay with that student for years to come. One of my central strategies is to push my students fairly hard for most of the term by giving them challenging weekly assignments. Then I like to give them a break towards the end. The nature of the weekly assignments varies a little

depending on the exact content of the course. In a logic or philosophy of language course, they tend to be problem sets that help students get comfortable with the formal tools we're using. On these assignments, I want students to think creatively not just about how to solve a problem, but about why it's difficult—and if they can't address it at present, then I ask them to clearly articulate what resources would they need to do so. Often, the heavy lifting that students have to do on these assignments leads naturally into a paper topic later on. In a history of philosophy course, I like to emphasize close reading of primary texts, which means that the weekly assignments take the form of in-class quizzes that ask students to discuss the central argument of the reading for the day. After having spent time on their own puzzling over a difficult problem, students become all the more curious to hear about how their instructor would attack it. One can try to make general remarks about how to write a good paper at various points in a course, but I think the most effective way to communicate one's expectations is to show students first-hand what meeting those expectations might look like.

I think that keeping one's audience in mind is especially important in a subfield like the philosophy of language, which can seem overly technical and intimidating to many philosophy majors. A lot of introductory philosophy of language classes take the 'sink or swim' approach: throw the students head-first into a universe of formalisms and terminology they haven't seen before, and let the precocious ones figure everything out. Although the sink or swim method works well enough for students with a mathematical temperament, it also has the unfortunate effect of making everyone else walk away from these classes a bit jaded, thinking of the philosophy of language years later as alien, excessively specialized, and even unphilosophical. I think that's a shame. The philosophy of language has a great deal of insight to offer the discipline as a whole, and it also needs regular input from other subfields in order to keep its ideas fresh. So I feel a strong incentive to take a different approach. I don't assume any background at all in my undergraduate philosophy of language courses: I teach my students everything they need to do the exercises starting on the first day. That doesn't mean I make it easy, of course. The ideal is to challenge rather than confuse students: they should struggle to develop a good response to what you're asking, rather than struggling to understand what you're asking or why you're asking it. I believe that my teaching experience has had a salutary effect on my interactions outside of the classroom: when presenting my work to philosophers in other subfields, I have frequently been told things like, 'This is the first time I've really been able to understand a philosophy of language paper.'

My encounters with students of varying backgrounds have also influenced me in various extracurricular philosophical pursuits that could be said to share a close affinity with teaching. As creator and co-host of the *Elucidations* podcast, I am constantly trying to anticipate where my listeners might get lost or confused, and phrase the conversation with my guest so as to be intelligible to nonspecialists in the area we are discussing. The main purpose of that project is to present the state of the art of the discipline both to professional philosophers and to the greater community at large, which usually involves collaborating with my guests to develop ways of getting people from all backgrounds excited about the topic of an interview. And my experience as a Fulbright IIE fellow in the Netherlands during the 2011-2012 academic year further cemented my desire to extend my teaching beyond the university setting. During that year abroad, I travelled to high schools all over the country, giving introductory lectures on philosophy, linguistics, and cinema to students who on the whole had never been exposed to these subjects before. The response I received was overwhelmingly positive—one nine-year-old raised her hand in the middle of class to ask whether there were any special requirements for someone who wanted to study philosophy.

For me, philosophy fundamentally is teaching, even the dimension of it that purports to be pure research. In practice, I really don't draw much of a distinction between the two. My courses are designed so that anyone can participate in them, regardless of their background. But once I get everyone up to speed on the basics, I try to waste no time in giving them truly difficult problems to wrestle with—

problems on which I'm presently writing a paper; on which scholars in the field have yet to reach any consensus. Philosophy is unique among the disciplines in its ability to invite newcomers, because its most innovative ideas can be expressed in simple, commonsense terms without any danger of being watered down. It would be a missed opportunity not to exploit this fact.