

# Teaching Statement

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Two principles guide the teaching of my classes. First, philosophy is an *activity*. And second, it is best done *in concert with others actively doing philosophy*. Philosophy is an activity in that it is not merely the acquisition of propositional knowledge but an undertaking that demands time, effort, and the cultivation of habits and skills. Philosophy is best done in concert with others actively doing philosophy because it demands a plurality of intuitions and experiences to accurately evaluate claims and their consequences. In this statement, I explain how my teaching is guided by these two principles and how they became central to my approach as an educator.

When I first stood before a classroom full of eager undergraduate students, I immediately recognized a hesitation and a confusion about how best to engage with the material and the philosophical tradition. In this discipline where every assumption is supposed to be questioned, how is the student to relate to these authors and arguments—some from over 2,000 years in the past? Where is there room for the individual student's voice and perspective? These questions are especially thorny in philosophy, where an appreciation of the various traditions in the history of philosophy and an emphasis on rigorously analyzing offered arguments exist alongside each other. These students, I came to realize, cared deeply about many of the topics that the material treated, and they recognized that their fellow students also had thought deeply about these topics. However, they were unclear about how to bring their own perspectives to bear on the material, the views of their professor and TAs, and the views of their classmates. In short, many students did not know what to *do* with philosophy.

I first took this hesitation born from perplexity as a lack of interest in or even fear of making their views known, so my initial response was to hand them more and more material. Surely, I thought, with enough context and perspectives they could not help but jump into the debate. But I soon came to realize that overloading students with material only increased their hesitancy because it further edified a tradition from which they felt alienated. These students did not need more readings or lectures; they needed to learn how to *practice* philosophy and *peers* with which to practice it.

Such an approach requires building engagement, comfort, and familiarity in the classroom, where class goals are clearly expressed and students' prior knowledge inform these goals. I learned to present material in ways related to students' prior knowledge and past content. Students must be offered multiple opportunities to experiment with and demonstrate their engagement with the material, including breakout groups, quizzes, student presentations, and mock debates. And feedback must be consistently given throughout the course, providing students evaluations of their work and actionable steps to improve.[1]

Students are not mere consumers of ideas and information. As students differ in their interests, prior knowledge, and means of engagement with the material, course materials should be offered in multiple formats (if possible), thus aiding in both retention and providing alternatives for those with alternative learning approaches. Further, student motivation is a primary concern and much care must be given to providing multiple points of access to the material, so that students can see how course material relates to their particular experiences and interests. [2]

The strategies and concerns outlined here have contributed significantly to the learning outcomes of my students and my own pedagogical goals. However, I recognize that my own trajectory as an educator is ongoing, and there are two areas that I see potential for growth. First, as classroom technology continues to evolve and create more opportunities and challenges for participation and engagement, I aim to include certain technologies without detracting from the intellectual work that is the primary focus. Second, demonstrating to students the applicability of philosophical methods to recognized philosophical issues is not difficult, but successfully getting students to apply these same methods beyond the realms in which they were presented is quite a challenge. Better meeting students where *they* are and showing the benefits of rigorous analysis and argument to *their* lives is a skill that I am continually refining.

### References:

- [1] See Robert Gagne's Events of Instruction. Gagné, R. M., Briggs, L. J., & Wager, W. W. (1992). *Principles of instructional design* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- [2] See the principles of Universal Design Learning (representation, action and expression, and engagement). CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>.