

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Learning philosophy demands *doing* philosophy, an active engagement with ideas that begins—in the university classroom as in professional academic life—with persistent and rigorous questioning. In my courses I model a self-reflective, questioning approach to philosophy in the service of two principal goals: 1) developing an appreciation of the importance of critical inquiry for self-knowledge and engagement in everyday life; 2) aiding such inquiry through the cultivation of skills in thinking, writing, and oral communication—skills that facilitate an engaged and self-reflective life regardless of the student’s chosen profession and path after college.

In the classroom I further these goals through a Socratic, constructivist approach that uses questions to lead students to the evaluation of reasons and presuppositions in relation to their own experience. In teaching Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, for example, I ask students, *before* reading the text, to reflect upon and summarize in writing the sources of their own morality. Our first discussion of the text is then framed in terms of a Nietzschean “confrontation” with their views: “How does Nietzsche’s critique of ‘slave morality’ challenge your beliefs?” “Why would Nietzsche want to do this?” “What is his strategy?” In a subsequent assignment students write a short dialogue in which they pose a question to Nietzsche and then debate with him, with special emphasis on fairly presenting his position and reconstructing the arguments for it. Students find it especially helpful to think about their own views from an interlocutor’s perspective through such assignments.

Outside of class I favor forms of engagement that bring philosophical ideas and arguments down to earth for students, encouraging them to develop complex ideas and to put philosophy into practice in low-stakes environments as a way to build up toward higher-stakes environments (such as papers or exams) in a more meaningful and less stress-inducing way. Recent courses have accomplished this by requiring students to post short, unedited video or audio recordings as an alternative to typed responses. In a Modern philosophy survey course, for example, I framed this assignment as the students’ creation of an informal network of digital letters in imitation of scholarly correspondence in the seventeenth century Republic of Letters. Students hesitant to engage with their peers or to explore philosophical ideas in formal writing discuss more freely with one another and are more able to make connections to their own values and life experiences through this informal, online, visual-oral medium. The video assignments also raise expectations for clarity and originality of thought since students’ work is available to and discussed by their peers.

In all of my courses, writing is positioned as continuous with the work of doing philosophy. I teach my students that writing is an active form of thinking, not a form of “reporting.” This helps them to see writing about complex ideas as not just a task completed for a grade, but a way of clarifying one’s ideas—and one’s questions—through careful argument and precise explanation. In introductory philosophy courses I assign short, two-part “summary and response” papers, in which, after writing a concise one-page précis of a text or argument, students must pose their own philosophical “exploration question” in relation to it and write a short essay responding to that question. Requiring students to write their own questions improves their ability to formulate original and pertinent lines of inquiry (one of the most commonly under-developed skills among my first-time philosophy students), and helps to insure that written work maintains a focused engagement with the course material and avoids sweeping generalizations. In more advanced assignments I place special emphasis on extended engagements with specific course-related topics, often of the student’s choice. In an undergraduate philosophy of science course, for example, students created websites presenting possible cases of pseudoscience and then evaluated them according to canonical accounts of demarcation criteria.

A focus on clarity in thinking, reading, writing, and questioning is the key to successful learning in the college classroom and especially in the discipline of philosophy. I aim for continued progress toward these ideals in my own scholarship, and I work to instill the same goals in my students at all levels of the curriculum, helping them to develop not only philosophical knowledge and academic skills but also a lifelong passion for learning, thinking, and questioning.