Teaching Statement

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I decided to pursue an academic career because I wanted to teach philosophy. Studying philosophy as an undergraduate brought clarity, structure, and creativity to my thinking in a way that no other subject could match. I hoped to make it my life's work to pass these benefits onto others. After several years of teaching my own courses, I am more committed to this than ever.

My teaching focuses on the goal of improving students' philosophical skills. By this I mean their ability to identify key claims in texts, separate premises from conclusions, recognize the logical structures of arguments, think for themselves about how to respond to them (with charity), and express their own ideas with clarity and concision. I see engagement with philosophical texts in my classes primarily as a means to developing skills that will endure and find application both within and beyond philosophy.

To accomplish this goal for my students, I set four objectives for myself as an instructor.

First, in designing my courses, I look for readings that model the skills I want my students to build. Whether it's a journal article, book excerpt, or logic text, I look for material that communicates subtle ideas in an accessible way, with readily identifiable central arguments and due consideration of opposing views.

Second, I try to serve as a personal example of philosophical skill. In class, in one-on-one student meetings, and in giving written feedback, I try to model the process of engaging philosophically with the concepts and arguments at hand, and to demonstrate the power of thinking with precision.

For instance, in each meeting of my intro to philosophy class, I work with students to extract the central argument from the day's reading and break it down premise-by-premise. This provides a foundation for all subsequent discussion: the central argument establishes the key terms of the debate, and objections and replies are understood in relation to explicitly stated premises and inferences. This is intellectually demanding work, but I try to carry it out with enthusiasm, humility, and humor, to create a convivial atmosphere that encourages the spontaneous exchange of ideas.

Third, I try to convey to students that philosophy is a vibrant living tradition that they can participate in without delay. I show that it is a vibrant living tradition by assigning readings that allow me to draw connections between contemporary and historical philosophers; for instance, reading Jeff McMahan's "Death and the Value of Life" introduces students to a famous argument from Epicurus, and reading Brie Gertler's "In Defense of Mind-Body Dualism" allows for discussion of Descartes on dualism and Hume on causation. And I empower them to participate in this tradition by showing them that all arguments are built on contestable premises, encouraging them to think of ways to contest these premises, and validating their efforts in class and in writing.

Finally, I design my courses to build students' philosophical skills from the ground up, in a manner compatible with varying levels of starting aptitude.

For example, I structure my intro to philosophy course around five short writing assignments. In each, I ask students to reconstruct the central argument of a text, define technical terms with a lay reader in mind, and reply to the central argument by employing one of three critical strategies: questioning an inference, rejecting a premise, or teasing out an implausible implication of the conclusion.

Over the semester, these assignments gradually increase in length and difficulty. But students are guided throughout by constructive feedback on their work, resubmission opportunities on early papers, and explicit demonstration in every class meeting of the kind of exegesis and criticism I want them to produce. With this approach, improvement in economy, precision, and accuracy of student writing over the course of a semester is often striking.

Disparities in starting aptitude are typically the most striking in logic class. I deal with this (in part) by abolishing mandatory homework and replacing it with weekly in-class quizzes. These quizzes are worth modest amounts of extra credit; this provides incentives for rigorous home study (to prepare for the quizzes) and attention to detail in constructing proofs (because I give no credit to quiz answers that contain mistakes). It also keeps me up to date with each students' progress, which allows me to reach out to students who are lagging behind to offer extra help. Meanwhile, those who struggle initially are barely penalized, because at worst they miss some extra credit. Moreover, I review each quiz right after the students take it, so that they can clear up any confusion about the relevant material with the quiz problems fresh in their minds.

Ultimately, these objectives are all means to the end of improving students' philosophical skills. I believe these skills are relevant to virtually all intellectual endeavors, academic and otherwise. As I tell my students: philosophical skills have to do with arguments, and arguments are present whenever anyone is trying to rationally convince anyone else of anything. If you can recognize, interpret, develop, and criticize arguments, then you can think critically, and you'll be better at whatever intellectual tasks you set your mind to. Hence even students who do not develop a sustained interest in philosophy as an academic discipline can benefit from studying it.