

Teaching Statement

I began to critically examine the value of education, and, in particular, of philosophy, as an undergraduate. Elected by my peers as Admissions Officer, I visited schools across Britain to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to university. Upon learning that their degree class would be based solely on their performance in “Finals,” a number of them challenged: what had such exams to do with the impassioned philosophical debates that I had been describing?

Through such conversations I realized that to be the educator I wanted to be necessitated careful—and philosophical—reflection upon educating. Philosophers not only have knowledge that they wish to convey, nor only skills (including close reading, critical thinking, and precise writing) that they want to impart, but a desire that they hope to instill: the desire to seek wisdom. Although the methods we use to evaluate students (which need not be exams) must test their grasp of material and their ability to apply key skills, our classroom ought to model this desire. So, teaching how to do philosophy is only part of teaching philosophy. We must also teach the value of being a philosopher, which I strive to do by example, approaching each class open-mindedly and enthusiastically.

My dedication to teaching has been recognized at both the university level (with the student-nominated Elizabeth Baranger Excellence in Teaching award) and by the philosophy faculty at the University of Pittsburgh, who twice selected me to mentor other graduate students. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to direct undergraduate research and to teach classes that range from one-on-one tutorials to lectures with forty students at both public institutions (Bridgewater State University and the University of Pittsburgh) and private institutions (Harvard University and William Jewell College). I have taken advantage of these experiences to develop ways to engage an array of burgeoning philosophers, from first-generation students to ones who are well prepared for college.

I design my courses around discussion. Learning how to discuss effectively involves *speaking*, but also *listening* and *writing*. To develop students’ *speaking* skills I often use small groups, moving through the classroom and shepherding conversations to draw out key steps in students’ reasoning. When I assign oral presentations, I ask students to field questions from the class. In upper-level courses I sit out of this initial conversation to allow students the freedom to explore, before using the remaining time to address those issues that they found most interesting and/or difficult.

Secondly, and just as crucially, students must learn to *listen* to one another, and to become skilled at reconstructing each other’s positions just as they reconstruct the arguments in the texts we discuss. I begin each semester with a discussion *about* discussion, and when an opinion counts as “informed.” As a class, we establish standards to which we will hold each other accountable—such as showing each other respect, and answering each other rather than speaking “through” me as the instructor—which I remind the class of as needed during the semester. I intermittently distribute discussion self-evaluation sheets (in which students explain a helpful comment made by another student—a way to encourage speaking and listening—and their own best comment), which I later use to organize students into groups with similar interests for the following class discussion.

Thirdly, students must develop these discursive skills through *writing*. To be persuasive they need to consider objections from imagined interlocutors. Except when teaching Logic, I seldom use traditional exams. Instead, having practiced with short papers (for intro-level classes) or weekly response papers (for upper-level classes and tutorials), my students write a term paper answering a question of their own design. I meet each of them to discuss their chosen topic, and am regularly impressed by their maturity in the (initially daunting) search for a fruitful yet focused philosophical inquiry. The critical (and often lengthy) feedback I give students on all written work—feedback that my students consistently report is a strength of my teaching—models how precisely they need to articulate themselves if they are to successfully convey their ideas. By the end of the semester, the broadest lesson I hope my students have learned is to be dissatisfied with received wisdom, and to instead learn to—and learn to *want* to—develop cogent reasons that justify their beliefs.