Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Excellent teaching is not the result of mere talent. Teaching is a skill that is best fostered by guided practice and a commitment to continual growth. I would like to spend my career continually growing as a teacher, through reading in pedagogy and by being part of a team whose members sharpen each other's skills.

The skill of excellent teaching is just whatever best fosters excellent learning. Recent evidence from the study of learning strongly indicates that students learn best when they are made to take an active role in building understanding. "The one who does the work does the learning"[1] expresses this well: if the students work to understand and evaluate course material, then they are much more likely to retain it. This obviously doesn't mean the teacher plays a passive role. Instead, we must work to develop questions and assignments which direct student's work in productive ways, and continually monitor students' progress—ready to redirect on the fly when necessary. Similarly, we teach the skills that are required for students to be able to "do the work" effectively.

This ideal—sometimes called "active learning"—guides my teaching. One way I put this into practice is by emphasizing "class content stories": an overall structure to the course subject matter that can be communicated to students throughout the semester. This helps students situate their current work within an overall narrative, helping them build the sort of connections between subjects that experts take for granted. I suspect that this is particularly important with introductory classes, when students lack previous exposure to philosophy and so require extra help to understand how their readings fit together.

I see a philosophy class as structured largely around reading classic works on the class's topics. For this reason, the great majority of my assigned readings are from a variety of primary sources, both historical and contemporary. For upper division courses, I will usually also include a recent book on the subject in the last unit—either a monograph or debate-style book with multiple authors. My goal is to allow advanced students to interact with current philosophical discussions, and develop a sense of what engagement with a particular issue looks like in the contemporary field. I may use textbooks for secondary reading to help convey a class

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[1]   Doyle (2008) is, so far as I know, the originator of this phrase.

content story, but students focus on grappling with works that have shaped the field and contributions to contemporary debates.

For this reason, I think it is important to explicitly teach students how to read philosophy, especially in lower-division courses.[2] Philosophers approach texts very differently than philosophy students, and explicit instruction about the assumptions and habits of philosophers can help bridge that gap. But since active learning requires more than merely receiving advice from me, I also use low-stakes assignments (quizzes and summary-reaction papers) where I can give students rapid feedback on their reading skills.[3] Reading philosophy, when done properly, is a way of doing philosophy, and so I want my students to approach it as a way of increasing their philosophical prowess.

Similarly, writing is an essential part of actively learning philosophy. For introductory courses, I assign a series of short papers designed to gradually introduce philosophical skills.[4] For upper level courses, I will assign term papers requiring independent research, rough drafts, and peer review. (When class size permits, I also want to include class presentations of their work.) When providing feedback, I make a few substantial comments, both positive and critical. I avoid marking everything I could, since I don't want students to be overwhelmed. Instead, they are expected to use each comment to improve their future work.

My commitment to active learning influences all areas of my teaching. Tests include questions that require students to go beyond what was said in class, applying higher-order skills to fresh problems. Class discussions involve activities designed to engage students' natural desire to problem solve, whether by simulating an ethics committee to practice moral reasoning or playing a prisoner's dilemma game to appreciate political theories.

To paraphrase what Bernard Williams said about writing on ethics, teaching ethics is

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2   Concepcion (2004) has been very helpful to me on this point.
3   Hoeft (2012) gives evidence that these measures also increase the number of students who actually do the reading.
4   I have had success with a system similar to Dustin Locke's (unpublished), where introductory student's writing assignments are graded on a levels system like that of martial arts and video games. The basic idea is that students progress through three levels of writing assignments from summary to critical evaluation, only moving on to the next when they have completed the previous one satisfactorily. The goals of this system are to ensure that students achieve basic skills before attempting more complex challenges, to make it easy for me to give focused and effective feedback, and to give students a sense of their progressive accomplishment.

hazardous. Done badly, we may culpably "[mislead] people about matters of importance."[5] Worse, we may even promote a reliance on the facile application of philosophical principles that make our students worse people.[6] Nor do these problems apply only to ethics—epistemology, philosophy of religion, and political philosophy pose similar challenges. So my goal as a teacher of philosophy is not just to teach excellently in the sense that I enable my students to achieve deep learning about philosophy. I also want to teach in ways that avoid making them worse off—and if possible, I want to do what I can to help them become virtuous. Right now, I do not know as much as I would like about how to do this, although trying to model intellectual humility seems a good start. I hope to continue to learn about how to teach philosophy in ways that make my students not just better thinkers, but better human beings.

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5   Williams (1972) xvii.

6   Ficarrotta (2009) gives a good discussion of this problem, emphasizing the importance of teaching the complex relation between ethical theory and moral practice to avoid it. He only tangentially addresses what is (to my mind) the deeper worrying possibility: that teaching moral theories may make not make students better moral reasoners as often as it makes them better at rationalizing what they already want to do.