

## Teaching Philosophy

Current events show that our society is in dire need of critical reasoning skills. I teach philosophy in hopes of contributing to a more reasonable, reflective, and intellectually modest community.

Philosophy has a reputation of being impractical. However, recent statistics show that students who study philosophy consistently do better than any other major at the verbal and analytic writing sections of GREs, LSATs, and GMATs (and are second only to physics in the math sections). I conceive of my classes, in large part, as professional development for the emerging workforce. The reality is that very few of my students will go on to become professional philosophers. But in my classes, students will learn how to write carefully and critically; they will learn to articulate their ideas precisely; and they will gain the ability to think all the way around an issue—a skill that requires charitably formulating a position opposed to their own.

The best philosophy classes are electric. Students are pushed to formulate the strongest version of their ideas. Then those ideas are tested and, when appropriate, politely challenged. When students feel the energy of impending participation, it feeds the room. When students know the classroom is living marketplace of ideas in which they will have the opportunity to let their ideas shine, they gain tremendous motivation to be prepared. I conceive of my role in the classroom primarily as a Socratic facilitator: seeing that all sides of an issue emerge in a respectful and nuanced fashion. Not all students learn the same way. And it is extremely important for any university educator to be mindful of the varying backgrounds and degrees of preparedness with which their students enter the classroom. But this does not mean teaching only to those who are least prepared. The trick is to structure each class with elements that engage the more advanced students while at the same time covering issues and employing methods suitable for students who are just being introduced to analytic philosophy.

Philosophy desperately needs diversity. To encourage diverse students to take up an interest in philosophy, I always include women and minority authors on my syllabi; I often personally write letters to women and minority students who have done well in my classes encouraging them to consider a philosophy major; and I take great pains to make sure that classroom discussion is not dominated by only a few voices. In every semester, there is inevitably a subset of students who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of large groups of their peers. In order to hear these students' voices, my courses always include a few small-group exercises and writing-workshop days.

Of course, orchestrating balanced discussion is not all that goes into university teaching. My role is also to demonstrate skills in action. Sometimes this means showing how to distill a difficult text into a basic argument, showing how to locate weaknesses in an argument, or demonstrating what might constitute a response to a difficult objection. In large classes, lecture cannot be avoided. When preparing lectures, I strive to follow a few basic heuristics: 1) minimalistic slides; 2) mix of careful analysis of text and material outside the reading; 3) plenty of pauses for discussion; 4) mixed media when appropriate; 5) beginning, middle, and end.

I think of writing assignments as a way to gauge both the progress the students are making and the effectiveness of my teaching. I find that requiring students to submit drafts of their final papers and make revisions based on my comments greatly increases the chances that the students end up with a piece of writing they are proud of and feel invested in. I make extensive comments on student writing. If they get nothing else from my class, they will learn to write.