

Teaching Statement

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I have two goals that guide how I help students learn. First, I want students to recognize that moral, religious, political, and philosophical issues are more complex and require more thought than they might initially think. Second, I want students to develop skills that will help them to approach their lives philosophically. In this document, I explain some of the strategies I use to pursue these goals.

I choose and frame material and assignments with the explicit goal of revealing philosophical complexity to students where they do not expect to find it. For instance, this semester the first major topic in my intro courses is the philosophy of humor, and my students report being surprised by the fact that philosophical questions arise for something so familiar and present in their lives. A corresponding assignment asked students to reflect philosophically on their major, first on their own and then with an expert, by uncovering philosophical questions that arise in their field. An Interior Design major reported feeling hopeless when she first heard the assignment, only to eventually come up with ten philosophical questions about interior design after discussing the assignment with her advisor. For another example, next semester in my Philosophy of Race course, I will ask students to find a “meme” on social media that advances some proposition about race and to analyze it in light of what was learned in class.

I aim to give students some autonomy in their choice of assignments, as I think this helps students learn to approach their lives philosophically. In addition to requiring a small set of assignments, students get to choose some assignments to complete from a set of “Additional Assignments.” These assignments range from the traditional – e.g., criticize an argument for a conclusion with which you agree – to the less traditional – e.g., create your own artwork that represents ideas discussed in class. No single assignment is required, but in order to get certain grades, students must complete a certain number of additional assignments. The hope is that if students are completing assignments that interest them, they will learn from them without worrying too much about grades. Indeed, I have had students enthusiastically work on some assignments for months or apologize for “getting carried away” with an assignment.

I help students learn abstract material by couching it in practical or applied issues. This is another reason I started my classes with humor: it allowed me to introduce students to logic and argument analysis using a topic with which they were familiar. Similarly, in my introductory ethics courses, we indirectly address ethical theory in the contexts of duties to the poor (consequentialism) and oppression and exploitation (deontology). At the Eastern APA Teaching Hub on Innovative Methods in Philosophical Pedagogy, I will be demonstrating this approach with an online game called “Behind the Veil” that I have developed with some of my colleagues. The game allows students to experience what it might be like to bargain and structure a society behind the veil ignorance, and then to “live” in that society.

At my current university, where students’ perspectives mostly overlap – most students are white, Christian, and politically conservative – I play a fairly large role in the classroom by playing devil’s advocate. I don’t care what my students end up thinking, I only care that they think. In a more culturally and politically diverse university, I would opt for a less centralized classroom because I would expect conversations in this setting to move in more fruitful directions without much instruction.

When new material is introduced in class, I make sure students experience this as conversational. I do this by using examples from my own life, serious or funny examples to which students can relate, stories in the news, narratives I make up, etc. I also use “peer instruction” to allow

students the opportunity to learn from and correct their peers' understanding of course material. A typical day in my classroom consists of a brief lecture followed either by small group discussions aimed at applying and grappling with the presented ideas, or by discussing a podcast or video from social media.

Since many of my students have commitments and challenges – e.g., jobs, or being first-generation college students – that make pursuing their educational goals difficult, I use the classroom to give them opportunities to promote those goals. For example, in the first or last few minutes of class, I use a variety of methods to help my students do “retrieval practice,” practice remembering, applying, and elaborating on arguments and ideas discussed earlier in the course. Also, to keep students engaged in class and provide them with an opportunity to think critically about material before we discuss it, I often begin classes with a “prediction exercise.” For instance, this semester I began one class with this question: “When my 3 year old daughter succeeds at daycare, her teachers often say, “Oh, you’re so smart!” I hate this. Why?” After writing down their answers, students were engaged and had a stake in the following discussion concerning social scientific work on the effects of ability praise vs. process praise.

I have been focusing on how I help my students succeed. **I want to close by mentioning what I do when students fail.** I have high standards in my classes. Several seniors have told me that my intro-level courses are among the hardest they have ever taken in college. This means, inevitably, students fail assignments in my classes. But I allow students to redo most of the work they don’t pass the first time around. Although this is time consuming with a 4/3 teaching load this year, it’s worth it. Students rarely get the opportunity in school to learn from their failures. This sends them the false message that failure is the end of learning. Instead, I want to help students develop what psychologists call “growth mindsets,” rather than “fixed mindsets.” Indeed, this distinction and how people with these different mindsets reason about failure and difficulty are both content lessons in many of my classes. There is evidence suggesting that developing a growth mindset can be especially advantageous for students of color, first-generation students, and non-traditional students. All of my students, however, benefit from learning how to learn from failure.