

Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Pedagogy

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Everyone does philosophy. Of course, not everyone participates in the *academic discipline* of philosophy. But everyone tries to answer life's big questions: *What is really real? How do we know anything at all? How should I live?* These “wisdom” questions—both theoretical and practical—are philosophy's central concern. In answering them, everyone does philosophy, with varying degrees of intentionality and competence. A philosophy professor has the privilege of inviting students into the intentional, rigorous pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful. This task can be divided into at least two parts: *vision casting* and *equipping*. I begin with the former.

My description of the philosophical project—“the intentional, rigorous pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful”—doesn't match most non-philosophers' (or even some professional philosophers') conception of philosophy. (Perhaps “endless arguments about esoterica” is closer to the popular perception.) Thus, one of my primary jobs as a professor is to cast a grand, truthful, relevant *vision* of philosophy—its nature and value—so that my students will want to “buy in.” This can be done in many ways. One is to connect philosophy to real life—especially *students'* lives. Drawing on popular culture (literature, music, film), using examples from current events, and making applications to students' academic majors all help students appreciate why they should want to live examined lives. I've found these methods to be particularly effective when they are part of a judicious attempt to induce *aporia*—helping students see that they do not adequately understand some of the most fundamental questions of human existence, questions they likely think they have figured out. To avoid making the aporetic moment one of despair, I aim to model at least three things: epistemic humility, eager hope, and genuine interpersonal concern. Students need to see that, like Socrates, I know that I don't have it all figured out. At the same time, they need to see that I am genuinely excited about the subject matter, am confident that we can make progress, and care about making progress *with them*. When students can feel their inadequacy without shame, while also seeing the professor as an invested, seasoned co-pilgrim who cares about them, they are drawn into the philosophical project.

In addition to casting an enticing philosophical vision, a professor needs to help *equip* students to live examined lives. This equipping task has at least three foci: philosophical content, philosophical skills, and intellectual and moral virtues.

First, *content*. Part of my job as a professor is to help students learn the course's intellectual subject matter. By semester's end, students should have added some facts to their mental databases. But data accumulation is only one element (and, arguably, not the most significant element) in the process of

“learning content.” So I aim to help students digest content in other ways: to *understand* it, *appreciate* it, *retain* it, *apply* it, and so on. I design my course syllabi, lectures, group time, and assignments all with these content-driven goals in mind: the course’s various units cohere with one another and develop in an orderly way so that the connections between ideas is clear; class time is not a data dump, but allows for clarifying questions, dialogue, development of ideas, etc.; assignments have variety, requiring students to engage the content on the various levels described above; and so on. It would be unrealistic to expect every aspect of every class to help meet all of these goals. But I address all the goals in some way in every course.

Second, professors must equip students with *philosophical skills*. Philosophy majors need to hone some rather specialized professional skills, especially in upper-level courses. But all students need to develop skills of thought, interpretation, and expression—the ability to grasp and assess arguments, ask pertinent questions, express their views clearly and persuasively in both speech and writing, etc. Other disciplines can help students acquire such skills. But these skills are part of the special province of philosophy, so a philosophy professor is particularly well situated to help students gain them. I regularly give explicit training in these skills (e.g., through extensive comments on written assignments). But I recognize that much is “caught rather than taught,” so I am careful to model these skills as well (e.g., through my careful treatment of assigned readings in class).

Third, professors should aim to help students inculcate *intellectual and moral virtues*. A few *intellectual* virtues that stand out are charity in reading, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and love of knowledge. I include the cultivation of such virtues in the “course aims” of my syllabi, and craft assignments and in-class activities that help achieve these aims: to encourage charitable reading, I avoid overly lengthy readings, and sometimes assign the same reading multiple times; for intellectual courage, I create opportunities for students to overcome the fear of voicing their views, and highlight and praise courageous discussion in class; etc. Similar things could be said about *moral* virtues, though one must be sensitive to school context. Some schools would deem it inappropriate to highlight growth in moral virtue as a course aim, especially in courses outside ethics. In other contexts, though, it may be appropriate to go so far as to assign what philosopher Pierre Hadot, in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, calls “spiritual exercises”—practices of mind and body whereby one digests the doctrines of one’s philosophical school, so that those doctrines are not matters of mere notional understanding, but actually take up residence in one’s vision of the world. Socrates, the Epicureans, the Stoics, the Desert Christians, and other ancient thinkers incorporated spiritual exercises into their practice of philosophy. Where appropriate, I introduce my students to this rich tradition, with the aim of helping them see philosophy not merely as a one-semester course, but as the ancients saw it: as a way of life.