Teaching Statement
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Having the opportunity to teach is one of my favorite parts about working in philosophy. When teaching, I try to do several things. I try to help students learn to think slowly and carefully through difficult ideas, an aspect of which is learning to acknowledge uncertainty about what they think. I try to help students understand what it is to express something clearly in writing, and to learn to express themselves in that way. I aim, above all, to be respectful of students, to take their ideas seriously, and to communicate standards and hold students to them.

I pursue these goals whatever I’m teaching, but I also believe teaching different areas of philosophy demand different approaches in the classroom. Over the past couple years, I have taught an introductory logic course several times, which begins from scratch and ends with first-order logic. In these courses, and after trying more than one approach, I’ve come to see teaching via some logic software as essential. It not only makes class more engaging, but drastically improves student outcomes. I work through problems with my screen projected in front of the class, have students come up and work through problems on my computer in front of the class, and have students work on their own laptops in small groups. Making the class interactive this way is keeps students engaged and helps them internalize material more quickly.

In teaching other areas of philosophy—aesthetics, history of philosophy, philosophy of mind, for example—my approach is more deliberately aimed at discussion, and helping students appreciate the sense in which discussing philosophy is internal to the activity of doing philosophy. In lectures, I use PowerPoint, which is important especially in teaching aesthetics, where reflecting on objects of aesthetic appreciation—like music, (pictures of) paintings, statutes, buildings—is essential for thinking through the ideas. Always alongside this, however, I work to foster classroom discussion. I leave room for it to develop, or I ask leading questions until it does. Fostering discussion requires leaving room for students to communicate directly with each other, which is not always their default mode of engaging in class. It also demands that I resist my own impulse to jump in and make corrections at every conversational turn.

For coursework, especially in introductory or lower-level courses, I prefer giving many short and relatively low-stakes assignments throughout the semester. This makes it possible to give students feedback more frequently and with more detail, both of which are important for learning to write philosophy well. For more advanced courses, in which students have more philosophical developed interests and have also developed the skill of working in a focused way on a single topic, assignments can be longer. In all cases, I aim to be flexible. In an advanced class, if a student wants to write something longer, for example, even on a related topic the course didn’t cover, I am always open to discussing the possibility. In teaching logic, assessment is slightly different. There, too, I prefer frequent, lower-stakes assignments to infrequent higher-stakes ones. I give regular quizzes throughout the
semester, along with two different midterm-type exams. I assign weekly homework for practice, but grade it mostly for effort.

My teaching experiences aren’t limited to the university. I was a private tutor for almost 10 years, beginning when I was 20, both in New York City and in Los Angeles before that. I worked mostly for test prep companies, teaching students from a very wide range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. For example, I was a private tutor for three students at the Harlem Children’s Zone for over a year and half. They were getting SAT prep through a scholarship program established by the tutoring company I was working for. I also taught SAT classes at Santa Monica High School and Long Beach Polytechnic High School in southern California.

To teach effectively in these different contexts and to such different kinds of students, I learned to be sensitive to how widely the conditions of learning vary and depend on personality, and I translate these same skills to the university classroom. At the Harlem Children’s Zone, the atmosphere was intense and high-energy. Tutoring sessions took place in the same classrooms as other afterschool programs, so my students were surrounded by friends and classmates, perpetually in a state of near-distraction. To engage these students and hold their attention, I had to be intense and high-energy, too.

The university classroom often benefits the same kind of intensity, even if there isn’t the same potential for distraction. In introductory classes, for example, the material is often too difficult for students to be immediately enthused, so it is important to be able to grab their attention. Humor helps. It’s important to me that students come away from class feeling like they had some fun, in addition to feeling like they just did some intellectual exercise.

With other tutoring students, the effort wasn’t so much to hold their attention as it was helping them relax, to ease up on the pressure they placed on themselves. This is also something that helps university students. Students at both levels sometimes disengage, and ultimately underperform, because they become frustrated about mistakes or lack of progress or the sense they will never get it. Students like this benefit especially from a classroom environment in which it is perfectly routine to express uncertainty. I am also perfectly comfortable discussing the underlying feelings with students, too, if they bring them up with me.

Fundamentally, whether in the classroom or in one-on-one conversation, I work to keep challenging myself. How do I create curiosity with these particular students? How do I connect with them as individuals? How do I effectively acknowledge both shortcomings and successes? The questions receive different answers depending on the class and the student, and teaching well requires the willingness to keep asking them.