

Teaching Statement

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I come from a family of teachers, so perhaps it is not surprising that I love to teach. In particular, I enjoy seeing a student's face light up when a difficult idea suddenly "clicks", or sensing the excitement in a classroom when students suddenly feel the force of an argument.

I have taught at Denison University, Mount Holyoke College, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. My teaching at Denison included a philosophically themed writing course designed to teach first-year college students the techniques of academic writing. My teaching at UMass included courses in the Residential Academic Program, a pedagogy-oriented program designed to help first-year college students adapt to college life. I have taught (as the sole instructor) Introduction to Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Medical Ethics, Death and the Meaning of Life, Eastern Philosophy, Social and Political Philosophy, and Critical Thinking. In 2021 I was awarded the UMass philosophy department's annual Robison Prize for teaching excellence.

Over the years, I have learned a number of ways to make my teaching more effective. One skill I have worked particularly hard at developing is presenting a philosophical problem so that students immediately feel its force. For example, I once began a lecture on free will for an introductory-level philosophy class with a pair of thought experiments designed to motivate two different propositions: a version of determinism, and a version of libertarianism. Then, having made both of these propositions seem plausible, I said "these two propositions *cannot* both be true. One of them must be false. Can you see why?" Of course, a philosopher would have seen this coming from a mile away, but to the students this revelation came as a shock. It was immediately clear from their body language that I had their full attention, and lively discussion followed. These are the teaching moments I love the most.

I have also become passionate about promoting diversity in my teaching. For example, in the 2020-2021 academic year I proposed, created, and taught a new course on Eastern philosophy (surveying Indian and Chinese philosophy) for the UMass philosophy department to increase the diversity of the department's course offerings. Moreover, because Eastern philosophy is intrinsically interesting and a rich source of material for diversifying classes typically taught in Western philosophy departments, I have incorporated it into my other syllabi too. For example, the doctrines and arguments of the ancient Chinese school known as Mohism are a helpful and fascinating way to introduce students to consequentialist thinking in ethics, while also giving them a chance to hear voices from a non-Western philosophical tradition.

The Eastern philosophy course was conducted online due to the covid-19 pandemic, but I did a number of things to encourage healthy class discussion despite the limitations of this format. For example, I chose to hold synchronous class sessions via Zoom so that interaction could be live, I built “discussion times” into each lecture, and I encouraged students to use the chat function to talk about the material I was presenting. Some of the students mentioned this in their course evaluations. For example, one student wrote: “I enjoyed the side conversations that would sometimes emerge during the discussion of an argument; sometimes they were thought provoking and would lead into a new objection [to] it.” My hope is that this interactive component of the course was good, not only for the students’ intellectual development, but for their social and mental well-being during a trying time. In a similar vein, I found that if I waited a few minutes after the official start time before beginning, the students would socialize as they might in a normal classroom setting. So, with mental health in mind, I made it a point to give them a few minutes to chat before starting class each day.

Of course, in philosophy classes there are nearly always students who tend to dominate class discussion. In order to facilitate class discussion equitably, I use a tool that was introduced to me in some of the classes that I took as a philosophy student: “the finger system.” Instead of simply raising a hand, students are asked to raise one, two, etc. fingers, indicating whether this is their first, second, etc. contribution to class discussion that day. Priority is given to lower numbers. This method helps to distribute student contributions equally. It discourages individual students from dominating the discussion, securing more opportunities for less outspoken students to contribute.

These are some of the strategies that have worked well for me in the classroom. But because it is important to adapt and learn as an instructor, I also look forward to discovering and experimenting with new strategies for cultivating those teaching moments that I love.