Teaching Statement

The Enlightenment fostered an ideal of cultivating one’s freedom and one’s ability to use reason in order to decide for oneself what to do and what to think. I believe that teaching philosophy is a way to work towards the realization of this ideal. The most general end of my teaching is to make students see that this is a goal worth their attention and effort.

I do not think of this as simply flipping a switch: students must take an active role in their learning. At first glance, this idea looks simple and perhaps obvious. Getting the students involved can be quite a difficult challenge, but one I face gladly. I want my students to learn how to do philosophy. I believe that this can be achieved by teaching them how to read a difficult text and analyze it in depth, how to develop an argument in speech and writing, and how to make informed decisions whenever the alternatives are difficult to assess. I think that talking about philosophy is fundamental. But to do this well, one must understand what views a philosophical text is putting forward, and there is no better way to get clear about these views, than to write down the main arguments, raise objections, and aim to defend the views against those objections. As a philosophy professor I aim to help my students develop strong critical thinking skills, to last them a lifetime; and to do this, they have to be attracted to the activity, no matter the specific content.

To describe these goals without intimidating them, in my first pep talk, I tell them to think back to the first IKEA desk they ever assembled, and how hard it was to follow the instructions. I then tell them to imagine not even having those instructions, but just the exhibits in a design museum. Philosophy is like that: there are no set rules for you to follow, and the models you are given are immediately daunting, and, unlike desks, they usually contradict each other. So until you attempt to offer your own positions and arguments, and back them with your own reasons, you are far from doing philosophy. You might be left with admiring those philosophical views, just like you were admiring the different exhibits, without being able to appreciate what sets one apart from another, and without having one of your own.

To teach my students how to read, write, and talk about philosophy, I use several strategies. Right at the beginning of the semester, I give them a step by step demonstration of how to read a philosophy text: I present the main argument, I identify reasons for and against it, and I explain why some reasons and objections are stronger than others. The next step is to have them take an active part in this work. To do this, I ask them to write a one page summary, touching on the key points discussed in that lecture. Then, during the next office hours, I give them feedback concerning the organization of the material, and the reconstruction of the arguments discussed in class. By talking about these short writing assignments, the students soon come to realize that the same thought process that goes into analyzing a philosophical argument can be used to understand the structure of any kind of argument. Making informed decisions and evaluating arguments is something that everyone has an opportunity to do on a daily basis, whether to decide who to vote for, or whether to agree to undergo a risky surgery. The sooner they understand that what is required of them is not that different from what they are supposed to do every day, the easier things become, and the students are eager to get involved.

Participating in class is key for doing philosophy well; but participation can take many forms, and the most important one is talking to me and to each other. I always encourage students to ask questions if they do not understand something, but I have found that this is not the best strategy to get them talking, often because they fear displaying their ignorance. In order to help them overcome this fear, I tell them this: some of the things you hear will probably intrigue you. If you
are curious to know, for instance, why we discuss what it is like to be a bat, ask a question. By stressing how important it is to be curious, I encourage them to make their voices heard, and they learn how to do it when it matters most, outside of a particular philosophy class.

In the years I have been a Teaching Assistant, I have changed the way I handle questions from students: when someone asks a question, my gut reaction is to start answering it. But I have learned that this is rarely the best strategy. Instead, I ask somebody else to try and answer or clarify that question; I usually have a follow-up question or a point to make, to guide the discussion afterwards. But the students talk to each other, about philosophy, and they are likely to get more out of the conversation if it involves their peers. By being involved in the discussion, they develop their communication skills and learn how to successfully make an incisive argument stick. Depending on class size, this method can be applied in a lecture, if the discussion is kept shorter, and if I am careful to include as many students as possible, and not just the handful who answer my questions every time.

I have also changed the way I give feedback on their writing assignments: initially, I used to write so many comments on their papers, that sometimes the length of my comments was equal to the length of their essays. This was not productive: most of the students were overwhelmed and didn’t know what to do for their next assignment. Nowadays, I focus on three main points that could be improved, and I ask the students to come and talk to me after they get their papers back. In these meetings, I make sure that they learn how those general points can be addressed, even though the topic of the next assignment is different.

A useful strategy for fostering student participation in larger classes is to set up a course page on Facebook, with access restricted to the students enrolled in the class. My role as a moderator is to steer the discussion in the right direction and, during lecture time, to address some of the key points raised on that page. Or, I can ask the students proposing the most cogent topics of discussion on the course page to make a presentation, at the beginning of the next class. Small groups of students get to prepare a class project, discuss it with me in special office hours, and then present it to the rest of the class. I have done this in sections, with fewer students, and it always worked well, and I have seen this done in larger lectures. This is a good strategy especially in history of philosophy classes, irrespective of size. The students making the presentation for that week address the key historical events relevant for the figure discussed that week, and the philosophical conclusion of the text assigned for that meeting. The central task is to say how the text fits into its historical context. Once we fix on the big picture, we start looking at the arguments, the plausibility of the premises, explicit or not, etc. Thus, students learn how to make presentations, and the class benefits from having the end in sight, so that the lecture doesn’t feel like a pointless exercise.

To be able to implement these strategies, students must be willing to take responsibility for their own development. This is one of the greatest advantages of teaching college students: they are mature enough to be able to figure out what is good for them, with a little prompting, but they haven’t lost their curiosity and the desire to try things out and see where they lead. By encouraging them to participate and collaborate, I stress that what they are doing is a lot like training for a marathon. Each step is important, and every step they take on that road makes me want to see them take the next.