STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The moment I step into the classroom for a class I am teaching, I am ‘on’. My students notice: “you always look so happy when you come to class,” one of them observed a few weeks ago. I think that a large part of my success so far as a teacher and teaching assistant is the energy that I bring into the room, whether the class is about logic, love, or the proper use of “a”, “an”, and “the”. While I may sometimes cross the boundary between creating a jovial environment and providing ‘edutainment’, I would rather that I err in this direction than that my students think I don’t want to be there in that classroom with them.

The teachers who have had the biggest influence on me were the same way. They stand out in my memory as engaging personalities whose classes it was never a chore to attend. When I moved into a teaching role, I learned why: they were motivated by a love of teaching. My attitude in the classroom is less a conscious effort to emulate my favorite teachers than it is a natural expression of my enjoyment of the process of teaching itself.

Yet the more I teach, the more I also see this attitude as an expression of my core beliefs about philosophy and teaching: that rational conversation is central to the pursuit of philosophy, and that the skills acquired in an education in analytic philosophy can benefit students long after they leave the university. By engaging my students in the activity of philosophical conversation and debate, I attempt to give them an honest sense of the intellectual excitement inspired by progress in philosophy, in the hope that they will in turn be inspired to apply the methods and tools of philosophy to problems outside of the classroom.

One of my favorite tools to this end is the phrase “excellent – hold that thought.” To be pedagogically effective, classroom discussions need to have a clearly defined goal, and this requires that I constantly monitor and adjust the balance between keeping the conversation focused and allowing my students sufficient freedom to explore their ideas. By showing students how there may be several steps or unstated assumptions in an argument before the conclusion that they have leapt to, I can allow that freedom and yet use the conversation to model for them the analytical skills required for all philosophy classes. In directing the conversation this way, I allow students to identify their own unstated assumptions or beliefs, and to begin to recognize the value of philosophy as a tool for self-examination and growth.

To encourage this understanding of the value of philosophy, I also like to motivate these conversations using examples from their own lives—for example, illustrating issues of free will by using their decisions about what college to attend. I have found that this can make the difference between a student who thinks that an issue is ‘purely academic’ and a student who recognizes that his or her own deeply held beliefs are being challenged. As a result, I have had seniors who signed up for introduction to philosophy because they needed a general education requirement to graduate come up to thank me at the end of the semester and tell me that they have never had a class like it in college.

While directing conversations and setting conversational goals in class have come naturally to me, I also believe that teaching students how to write philosophy papers is a crucial part of their education in philosophy. My initial teaching assignments, however, were to logic courses, which did not give me the opportunity to guide students through the steps of writing a clear and cogent paper, and I found that I lacked an effective vocabulary for expressing what I was looking for beyond the most basic
requirements. I applied to the USC Writing Center in large part to fill this gap in my teaching, and am now in my sixth year as a writing consultant there. The experience has been invaluable to my growth as a novice teacher, giving me a vocabulary for talking to students about their papers, and for thinking about the process of teaching writing. This semester, I am using the conversations in my discussion sections to model the process of outlining arguments for papers, and my students have been very receptive to this approach.

For me, being a good philosopher requires being a good teacher. In every class, I try to inspire students to pursue philosophy further, if not as an academic discipline, then at least as a way of coming to better understand themselves and their beliefs about the things that matter to them.