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Teaching Statement

I like teaching philosophy. When I say that to students, they usually laugh, thinking that I'm either joking, or just trying to get their attention. They are only partly right; I also really mean it. But what I want to convey is my wish that they too will come to enjoy learning and doing philosophy.

Many students start out with an interest in the most fundamental philosophical questions: everyone wants to find out what is the right course of action in a given situation, and what makes it the right one; or (as it is often put) what is the meaning of one's life. As they advance, students risk forgetting the immediacy of such concerns. I think of this as my prime goal in teaching philosophy: to bring them back to that innocent immediacy – and especially to get them to appreciate philosophical questions as their own, to overcome their fear of uncertainty and abstractness, and to become friends with their feeling of wonder. Part of this will be taken up by the study of theories young and old, since this is a path we do not tread alone. But I keep on reminding them that the question is always personal: what should *I* think of this?

To the practical-minded, I also mention that there are quite a few side benefits to learning how to do philosophy. And most of them have to do with how hard it is. After the initial period of accommodation, many students quickly come to appreciate having learned how to discover and question their assumptions; or how to carry on a debate founded on good arguments, and honest thinking, rather than on opinions that just happened to one; or, how to speak and write more clearly and thus make their voice heard when it matters. This said, however, I strive to convince them that doing philosophy is worthwhile in and of itself.

I haven't found a foolproof method yet. Sometimes, my enthusiasm for a particular topic, even for those perceived as more abstract by the students, seems to matter just as much as what I actually say. One of the main challenges of such difficult topics is to prime the students to understand and actually feel the philosophical issues and their relevance in a broader context. Frege's puzzle, for example, if presented without a background story, doesn't usually set the blood boiling and the mind racing. So various aids are needed: diagrams on the board help, as does a story of the puzzle's place in Frege's theory, followed by a quick survey of the field of possible responses. At some point along the way, the goal is to get that "Ah, I see it now" moment.

Other times, the topic does it by itself, like in a class discussing relativism in ethics, where students were in the thick of it as soon as we started. In these fortunate cases, I try to be a good moderator, guiding the discussion and keeping it focused on the question at hand, not the person asking the question, or stating a particular answer. Once the students feel safe to engage, class participation increases dramatically in both quantity and quality. I didn't realize how important this was at first. Then, in a section, I reacted to a student's slightly overly impassionate remarks by saying that we should keep in mind that we are worried about the truth, not about who gets to it or who gets it wrong. To my surprise, though I took this to be something hardly worth saying, I noticed that some students sat up straight in their seats, and became much more involved in the class. Almost by mistake, I learned a lesson that helped me and hopefully my students.

Besides this very important role of setting the right atmosphere, I plan my classes accord-

ing to their intended audience. The freshman student has to learn first how to read and write a philosophy paper, in order to have a chance to appreciate philosophy. The blasé senior, who is worried about graduating and has mentally checked out of academia, needs to be reminded about the delights of learning by being pushed to discuss and debate. In all cases, I have found that students appreciate most of all clarity, concision, and straightforward answers to their questions. When I started teaching, I would begin any answer by qualifying it as if I was being examined by my professors. I now formulate the question a bit more slowly, for the class, then I try to answer “yes” or “no”, and then I explain. Often, no short answer is appropriate, and all I can do is explain why the question isn’t quite right, or why it is too complicated for a simple answer. But I learned to keep what I say as simple as possible, because what we are talking about is complicated enough to deserve it.

My research has been quite narrowly focused. I have found that I work best when I concentrate on a particular topic, and think about it until I gain some clarity. My teaching has been much more widespread. For instance, I always tried to TA for different classes, and each of the 3 classes I taught as an instructor has been in a different area: logic, philosophy of mathematics, and the history of analytic philosophy. Not because I get restless; my research pattern attests my inclination to dwell on a matter for as long as it takes. Rather, it is because I am genuinely interested in many topics, and teaching them is a challenge I welcome. And it is also an opportunity to clarify and improve my picture of the debate, its stakes, and its place in a wider scheme of philosophical issues.

For instance, in the only historical class I have taught, on early analytic philosophy, a typical reading list would have included classical papers by Frege, Russell, some logical positivists, Quine, etc. There are good reasons for this, and I have included such a course description in my teaching dossier. But in the particular year I was teaching it, most of the topics had already been covered in other classes, in a lot more detail than I would have had the time for, since Summer classes last only 6 weeks. So I decided to cover something that undergraduates at UCLA seldom encounter: Moore’s and Austin’s answers to certain kinds of skeptics. The class didn’t have the benefits of a survey; but the topic suited the timing of the class. About half the students started out by thinking that the skeptic is obviously right; by the end, most had been convinced that things are not quite so simple, that there are many skeptics, and that none of them is *obviously* right. Not everything worked. I assigned some passages from Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty” hoping to offer some insight into the difficulties of Moore’s “I have a hand” argument. In that I did succeed; but I ran out of time too soon, and students rightly felt that the last readings were under-explored. The pairing worked; the scheduling didn’t, and if there is a next time, I would try harder to let the class progress organically, not hurriedly.

Each topic, by its nature, stirs different levels of excitement in students. So I have learned to adapt my plans according to what I expect the students’ reaction to be, and, whenever it turns out that my expectations were wrong, adapt them again. It is this constant challenge to sense and satisfy my students’ needs that is why I so enjoy teaching.