

Teaching Philosophy (about teaching philosophy)

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In teaching philosophy, I have two aims that sometimes come into conflict with one another. In the first place, I want students to realize that they, too, can be a part of an ongoing discussion among philosophers – even if they have little or no prior experience with philosophy. Second, however, I want them to realize that philosophy takes a lot of work – that it's a rigorous discipline that can sometimes be difficult, confusing, and frustrating.

The first aim is important to me for a few reasons. First, of course, I love philosophy, and I want my students to get a taste of my enthusiasm. But there's more to it than that: I also think that sometimes philosophy *sounds* like it's an exclusive and perhaps superfluous subject to engage in, when in fact it's egalitarian and foundational. The questions that philosophers ask are the questions that all human beings find themselves asking, and the methods of answering those questions – careful thought, creativity, and argument – are available to everyone, too.

The second aim is important because we can't do philosophy without confusion and careful thought. Further, I think it's important for students to be comfortable with the uncertainty and the struggle that's sometimes involved in learning. As a philosophy professor, I think this is one of the most lasting skills that I can share with my students: the ability to be comfortable with uncertainty, and to know the kind of rigorous and careful thought required to devise a proposed answer. Perhaps more important still is the ability to *have* a view and still be open to argument and discussion.

Of course, these two aims are not necessarily at odds with each other, but I have found that things can get tricky when they're not balanced against each other. So, for example, class discussions can easily get derailed, or dominated by one or two enthusiastic students, when I allow the first aim (*i.e.* the excitement of doing philosophy) to overtake the second aim. Then, to take the opposite case, there are those times when the difficulty and rigor of philosophy overtakes the excitement of discussion and debate. Here, I worry that some students will simply 'give up' (or at least not put their backs into it) because the material suddenly, and rather tediously, requires attention to seemingly inconsequential detail.

But the best classes, and the type of class that I aim for, are those classes in which both goals coexist and, indeed, *complement* each other. It's one thing for students to be excited about doing philosophy; but it's another thing altogether for students to be excited about being confused, disagreeing with each other, and working hard to sort out a text or argument. (In fact, it's in those moments that I sometimes forget that I'm teaching at all.) I think philosophy – perhaps like some experimental sciences – is especially well suited when it comes to instilling this mode of

thinking in students. And, again, I think that the capacity to be engaged, but still confused and open-minded, is a much-needed virtue in many of the contexts that our students will find themselves in.

So how do I try to achieve this ideal? First, I have found that modeling goes a long way. When I first started teaching, I spent hours mastering the material and thinking of every possible objection or question that a student might raise. Of course, sometimes they raised questions that I hadn't even thought of, and in those cases, I would try to assert what little authority I thought I could muster. But in retrospect, I suppose that sent the wrong message about what one does when one does philosophy. Nowadays, I sometimes even pretend not to have an answer or view (not easy for a philosopher!), and head right for the text when a student asks a question.

I have also found that using 'thoughts and questions' (hereafter 'TQs') really helps in setting the tone and expectations for a particular class meeting. TQs are short reading questions that the students answer online before class using LATTE or Google Drive. I'm able to read their answers *before* class, and I use these to write my lecture and discussion for that day. I suspect there are a few reasons that TQ's are so useful. First, and most obviously, students have done the at least some of the reading. (Since using the TQs, I find that students are far less likely to 'derail' a discussion with opinions that don't refer to the reading, for example.) But perhaps more importantly, students have already given some thought to the ideas and questions raised in class, so that they're invested in the discussion and they have some prior thoughts that they can appeal to in class discussion. Finally (I hate to say it, but it's true), peer pressure goes a long way. If most of the students are striving to engage with the material, this sets the tone for the whole class.

In sum, then, I think it's important to keep both the joy and the struggle of doing philosophy in view when I'm teaching. And, when it really comes down to it, the struggle is part of the joy.