



Statement of My Philosophy for Teaching Philosophy

What is learning? Since it can be arbitrarily fixed to any point upon a continuum stretching from the automatic training of instinctual action to the inner drive to master abstract concepts, learning is hardly a univocal activity. Within the project of philosophy, however, I hold that learning has a specific character that is not to be confused with the mere acquisition of new facts. Facts certainly play a role in learning, but philosophical learning is not restricted to facts, because, at the very least, a student must learn what a fact is. This implies that learning is prior to facts, and that an education focussing on the mere acquisition of such is bound to be a frustrating experience for all involved. Thus, I would propose that philosophical learning is found within a dialectic of discernment between fact and opinion. I follow Parmenides here. Seen in this light, learning is the habit of reflection through which a student comes to a clearer insight into the nature of his or her opinions, and thus learns to problematise what first lies silently as the hitherto unquestioned structure of his or her view of the world.

While this reflexive process of discernment in and of itself is philosophical learning, learning is more fruitful when practised within an intersubjective context, because, in the interaction between the learner and a community, the dialectic between fact and opinion is brought into its highest relief. The community, then, is the proper site for philosophical education. In a university classroom, this site is preserved by the instructor, whose proper task is to facilitate the learning process by providing an environment within which the voice of that which has remained silent can be heard.

In my role as an university instructor, education is formal teaching. What, then, is teaching? I see teaching as having both material and formal goals. Under the material goals, I include teaching the subject matter at hand (the facts); under formal goals, I include teaching the broader lessons that can be drawn from the material, whether these lessons be speculative or practical. I consider these lessons to be formal because they are not restricted to the subject matter at hand, but are rather applicable to other matters. By speculative formal lessons, I mean teaching how to reflect on the subject matter in a logical and consistent manner, and by practical formal lessons, I mean teaching how to learn (for instance, learning methods of reading, of questioning, of discourse, of critical thinking, and so on). My unified goal as a teacher is to take these material and formal goals into consideration, and to teach such that their central role in education is not only supported, but stressed. And, judging from my teaching evaluations, I am certain that I am such a teacher.

While philosophical learning is the process of discerning the grounds of one's opinions, I believe that teaching philosophy is an external and formal process charged with possibilizing this discernment in accord with the above mentioned goals. How do I as an instructor actualize this process? Certainly, I have experienced the difficulties of striking that balance wherein the silent voice of presupposition can be aired. Sometimes the instructor is tempted to be too loud. Sometimes, the students. But the task remains: the students must attend to this voice themselves. As an instructor, I strive to have the students hear what they themselves are saying, and then try to lead them to the logical conclusions of their statements. By seeing where their thoughts end up, students learn where they began—that is, they learn what they presuppose. I have oriented my teaching around this principle. This method is also useful for teaching the material of a given philosopher as well; for, by seeing the logical extension of a philosopher's



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doctrine(s), students also learn the presuppositions. Learning such first principles then helps them to grasp more deeply that matter at stake for any given philosopher. This method also bridges the divide between students of differing abilities and learning styles because, rather than stressing an outward show of erudition, my teaching style first emphasises an inner journey of self-discovery, and then the revelation of a larger philosophical itinerary (understood both personally and historically).

Thus, my preferred manner of teaching is the following. I provide an exhaustive syllabus, which, beyond detailing my expectations and the grading structure, details the required matter to be covered each meeting (complete with a reading list). I also provide a comprehensive question list, broken down by class meetings. The students are required to have done the reading, and to come to class having prepared provisional answers for the corresponding questions. These questions are designed such that any student, having answered them, will have a valuable summary of the material, and will have had an initial experience in reflecting thereupon; here, we see the first moment wherein the formal and material goals of teaching find expression in my classroom. But the classroom does not become the site of a dry Question and Answer session; instead, I use the questions only as an entry point into an investigation of that lesson's subject matter. The classroom can then become a symposium wherein the students take part in a guided discussion that flows from their answers and further reflections. This procedure also benefits me, because I am constantly confronted with answers I have not expected, which in turn are motivated from points of view I had not entertained. As such, I can truly say that teaching in this manner has also educated me.

Recognizing of course that not all students are at the same level, I nevertheless have the same expectations of all students concerning critical thinking, content knowledge and written work. Critical thinking heads the list because I hold it to be the practical expression of philosophical learning as I outlined above. Paramount for me is that students learn to formalize problems such that they are not blinded by the content, but rather that they learn to see concrete problems within a larger philosophical framework that makes evident certain interpretive strategies based on the exercise of first principles and basic philosophical logic. I always strive to lecture in this manner, and thus I try to lead students to such an approach in their contributions to class. Second, I stress the need to have a solid understanding of the matter of the course, which I address through my question lists. The lists, however, also underscore the need for critical thinking, because a fair percentage of the questions themselves require a critical approach. Third, my syllabi stress the need for written expression by requiring two papers (usually based on the question lists). Beyond considering their philosophical aspects (critical thinking and content) I grade them with an eye to clear and economical expression. I support the writing process by encouraging students to hand in drafts that can be emended before final submission.

In sum, as a teacher, I strive to draw insight from out of the students themselves through a guided investigation to the important texts of the philosophical tradition. Emphasising a critical approach to their individual points of view, I aim to make explicit the need for each of my students to stake out a position within the larger community of thought.