

My teaching aims to provide students with an opportunity to form and evaluate philosophical views for themselves, to practice and improve expressing their own beliefs, and to take pleasure in philosophical reflection undertaken for its own sake.

My approach to philosophical education draws on the history of philosophy. In “What is Enlightenment?,” Kant argues that enlightenment is a process in which people emerge from “immaturity” by forming their own understanding of the world without simply following the guidance of someone else. This ideal of enlightenment carries a commitment to intellectual equality with it: none of us has an epistemic master, and each of us must decide for ourselves what to believe. Developing a similar theme in “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity,” Husserl suggests this liberation of inquiry is possible only once “immediate vital needs are satisfied” and “working hours are over.” At their best, my classes provide students with an occasion to pursue this sort of free and masterless curiosity. In this statement I describe several ways in which I guide my students toward this sort of inquiry.

I. Motivating Philosophical Curiosity

For many students who have not previously studied philosophy, it can be difficult to feel the attraction of philosophical curiosity. Why, they wonder, should we care what truth is or whether we have free will? One way that I make philosophical inquiry compelling is to connect abstract philosophical issues to students’ own lives. In “Philosophy of Law,” I initiate inquiry into the nature of legal authority by asking students to reflect on their own relationships with police, courts, and lawyers, and in “Philosophy of Popular Art,” I teach a unit on hip-hop and resistance, which encourages students to relate their own experiences of race and politics to aesthetic theory.

I also encourage students to form their own, independent judgments about the texts and questions that we study by asking students to speak up early and often about what they think. In lectures with 30 or 40 students, I break the class up into small groups that meet each day to work through a few assigned discussion questions and then report back to the class. Over the term, each student has several opportunities to act as spokesperson for their group. This ensures that all students participate in class discussion, including those who might otherwise hesitate to speak up. It also reduces pressure on students when they speak in front of the whole class, since they first have a chance to formulate their thoughts in a small conversation. This combination of small group work with large class discussions allows students to develop camaraderie and also helps them learn to formulate persuasive oral presentations of their ideas.

II. Advocating for Students

For students who are not from privileged backgrounds, finding the time “when working hours are over” to reflect philosophically can be difficult. Teaching at UCLA, a large public university that serves a diverse population including many first-generation students and recent immigrants, gave me a vivid sense of the many challenges that students face beyond the classroom. I recently worked with a student in my philosophy of law course who started out

the term always coming to class and handing in assignments but who gradually stopped attending. When I contacted him, it turned out that he was busy trying to renew his Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals permit and was worried about whether his application would be approved. He ended up completing the course and doing well in it, and he later wrote to tell me how much my understanding and the flexibility I offered with course assignments helped him. I have found that when students fail to complete assignments or show up to class it is usually not because they are uninterested but because of other things going on in their lives. Reaching out to these students as a supportive mentor, connecting them to resources, advocating on their behalf, and providing flexibility to balance their coursework with other obligations can provide more students with a chance to practice and enjoy philosophical inquiry.

III. Writing to Read and Reading to Write

One important aspect of cultivating students' independent philosophical judgment is teaching them to put their own views into writing. I often ask students to keep a "commonplace book," in which they write out quotations that catch their interest along with questions and ideas about the readings. Commonplace books encourage students to notice and register their initial reactions to a text as they read (confusion, frustration, satisfaction, and so forth). They also prompt students to draw connections with other texts, other courses they have taken, and their own experiences. The privacy afforded by commonplace books, in which students are alone with an author, complements the public space of class discussion and lets students jot down ideas that they are unsure of and might not yet make sense to anyone else. Commonplace books thus institutionalize an often neglected component of the reading-thinking-writing process and encourage students to read in a way that naturally leads into writing.

I also help students to break down the project of writing a philosophy paper into smaller more manageable tasks. I provide students with writing scaffolding exercises that help them to develop a thesis, build up an argument for that thesis, and consider and respond to objections to it. I devote a significant amount of lecture time to talking and thinking about writing to emphasize that advancing one's own views in writing is as important to the study of philosophy as is understanding the thought of historical philosophers.

IV. Learning with Students

To encourage students to see themselves as autonomous thinkers, I try to construct a non-hierarchical classroom. In lectures, including large lectures with 100 or more students, I model scholarly inquiry by playing around with interpretations, even when I am not sure if they will succeed, and publicly acknowledging when they do not work out. When I talk to students about their writing, I show them that I take their ideas seriously. One of the most rewarding courses that I have taught was a seminar on Nietzsche, Freud, and Husserl. I worked closely with each student on drafts of research papers on topics of the students' choosing, and one student continued revising his paper for months after the course ended to submit to an undergraduate journal. My dissertation incorporated ideas that I worked out in conversation with these students. Students were excited to see that I was researching some of the same material that they were writing about and listening seriously to their ideas as an expert, but not as an authority who is owed epistemic deference. Modeling philosophical curiosity helps students feel free to take intellectual risks and to have more fun with the ideas we study.