

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

George Wrisley
gwrисley3@gmail.com

My teaching philosophy consists in two general beliefs about education and philosophy's role in a good education, and three core beliefs concerning teaching philosophy effectively.

First, I believe that a good education is vital to a life well-lived: it is vital for the flourishing of the whole person and the society in which the person lives. And I believe that philosophy itself is a central component of such an education. As is often pointed out, as educators our purpose is not so much teaching others *what* but rather *how* to think critically about the world, themselves, their place in it, and the barrage of information received daily. Among other things, it is these critical habits of thought for which a philosophical education aims.

Second, however, philosophy goes above and beyond “mere” critical thinking. Each of us is inherently limited in his or her personal experiences and by his or her social and historical context. The study of the history of philosophy allows us to transcend these limitations. For example, whether one grows up within a Judeo-Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist culture, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* provides an excellent opportunity for a change of perspective on ethics and the good life. Plato, Confucius, Zhuangzi, Aquinas, Maimonides, Hume, Kant, Mill, et al., all give us a rich variety of ways to see the world and ourselves.

Given the importance of education and philosophy, the hard part, of course, is being an effective teacher, mentor, and role model. It requires care, subtlety, and finesse to teach students how to think critically and to appreciate, if not love, the possibilities that await them in reading, thinking, and writing about philosophy. This is made even more difficult since the opportunity to engage with students is limited to such a brief period of time in their lives. This is where my three core beliefs concerning teaching philosophy enter. With an emphasis on both teacher and student enthusiasm, the use of student-centered teaching methods, and regular, active writing, we can have an impact in the course of a single term.

Because of my students' positive feedback and my own experience as a student, I believe that enthusiasm in and out of the classroom is essential. Students thrive off of your enthusiasm. I love philosophy. I love reading it, thinking about it, writing it, talking about it, and teaching it. One of the most exciting things about teaching—aside from being a part of students' awakening to the rewards of philosophy—is the sheer amount that I learn. Either a student asks a question that frames the material in a different light, or in the midst of teaching I suddenly see something that I had not seen before. I view each class period as an opportunity for both the students and myself to learn and grow.

Importantly though, my students will learn best if they themselves are enthusiastic about philosophy. A key to awakening their enthusiasm is to get them to see the relevance of philosophy to their lives. For example, answers to questions concerning the existence of God, the soul, the nature of the mind, the subjective, relative, or absolute nature of ethics, the relationship between religion and ethics, all have important implications for our lives. I strive to tap into these implications to rouse my students' enthusiasm. For example, upon realizing that materialism has important implications concerning the possibility of an afterlife, students naturally engage at a deeper level with the issues involved in the mind-body problem.

While simply standing in front of a class and lecturing may be “easy” for me, not all students learn effectively from lecture alone. When engaging my students in philosophy, I

incorporate not only lecture and discussion, but also group work and short, in-class writing assignments in which the students write about a question I pose to them so that we can better discuss it. Further, because attention spans can be so short, it is very effective to break up a single class period into different activities. For instance, when reading J.L. Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence," in which he considers and rejects four different attempts to solve the problem of evil, I lay out the general problem and then break my students into groups. I assign to each group the task of either explaining one of the four attempted solutions or Mackie's reasons for rejecting them. The students respond well and it results in much more participation from everyone after we come back together as a class.

It has also proven helpful to engage my students' senses in different ways. For example, I incorporate visual explanations and examples other than the written word as often as possible. This can be done, for example, by using graphics in a Power Point presentation or video from the internet. Another example: when teaching Hume's problem of induction, I bring in an object with which the students are unfamiliar. I use an old, handheld slide viewer that is essentially a strange looking, small, red box. They do not know what it is or what it does just from looking at it and holding it in their hands. This helps to illustrate the idea that our knowledge of cause and effect relations is a posteriori.

Because not all students learn at the same rate, I make a point regularly to encourage students who are having trouble or who require more time to come to my office hours. And I make sure they know that I'm available at other times by appointment. I also utilize online course management software when available to address their questions and concerns, and to encourage discussion between students outside of class. Ensuring that the students feel comfortable both answering my questions and asking questions of their own is critical. Students must not be made to feel incompetent, nor can the instructor allow anyone to intimidate or belittle his or her fellow students.

Unfortunately, many students entering higher education are neither effective readers nor effective writers. The latter is particularly true when it comes to writing an argumentative essay. Being able to write a well-crafted argumentative essay is not only important in itself, but it is also indicative of a student's ability to formulate clear and reflective thoughts. As teachers and scholars, we know how much learning takes place while researching and writing. Because of this, I emphasize writing in my philosophy courses whenever possible. I have experimented with different methods and I have found that regular, short writing assignments are effective in both honing their writing skills and getting students to engage at a deeper level with the readings. As the course progresses, the short writing assignments go from being merely summaries to requiring evaluation of the arguments found in the texts.

In the end, the extent to which I am an effective teacher depends upon the students' coming away from what may very well be their only philosophy class with a better understanding of philosophy and how philosophy can positively affect and even change their lives. In the four and a half years I have taught courses such as *Principles of Reasoning*, *Introduction to Philosophy*, and *Ethics*, I have concentrated on helping my students achieve these goals. I have experimented with different ways of structuring my courses and a variety of teaching methods, and I have spoken with colleagues about their successes and failures. From student evaluations, conversations during office hours, class participation, and improvement in my students' writing abilities, I am encouraged to think that I am on the right path toward becoming an effective teacher, mentor, and role model. I eagerly await new opportunities to continue to develop and grow in all of these roles.