

On Teaching Philosophy

Jannai Shields

Philosophy is for everyone, and I try to teach it in a way that invites everyone into philosophical reflection. As the only field that encourages examination of all assumptions, it is a vital tool in answering the important questions that most people care about, regardless of race, gender, or background. Philosophy enriches students' pursuit of knowledge and truth. It deepens the strength of other disciplines by encouraging critical reflection on claims—as well as the evidence given in support of those claims—and develops students into scientists, historians, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs who care about truth and social justice.

My philosophy of teaching is to provide the structure that allows students to effectively examine assumptions. I say *effective* examination because I do not think that examination without increased understanding is worthwhile or effective. But, I firmly believe that philosophy can increase understanding when done well. Here are four pedagogical strategies that I use to provide effective structure for philosophical learning—strategies that contributed to my being nominated twice for the Edward Peck Curtis Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at the University of Rochester.

First, I create an atmosphere in which students truly feel welcome to express their diverse views. One practical way that I do this is I quickly learn names so that I can engage each student personally and pull them into the content. In class discussions, I look for philosophical merit in each comment and try to affirm students by acknowledging interesting aspects of the comment and building on it. Sometimes after a quieter student contributes a valuable comment to discussion, I email him or her after class to give affirmation. The result is that I have class days where every student contributes a thoughtful comment; having voiced their views and received thoughtful challenges from their peers, students' views change and become more nuanced.

Second, I make doing philosophy a collaborative activity. Sometimes this begins with individual reflection on course content and other times it begins with group activities that I prepare. For instance, sometimes I ask students to make groups of three and try to reconstruct an author's argument. These activities are precursors for philosophizing as a class. I invite students to raise

issues with respect to the text—either things they did not understand, or objections they might have. I write these on the board and we begin to discuss the reading as a class, reconstructing the argument as we go, thereby removing unclarity they may have had at the outset. This positions the students for philosophical interaction with the ideas in the text, enabling them to see the critical issues in play. By the time class ends, the issues that students raised were addressed organically in discussion or by me directly, and we are deeply engaged in discussing the background assumptions of the author.

Third, I use the Socratic method to instruct my students. Often, to get to the place where the Socratic method is effective, I lecture through difficult content, supplementing it with vivid examples to make points clear. This provides students with the scaffolding they need to do philosophy. As an example of this technique, while working through the *Meno*, I pointed out that Socrates seemed to be saying that humans cannot choose the bad while recognizing it as such. I asked the class whether they thought this was the case with the shooters recently in the news. This led to some of the most robust discussion of the semester; students gave interesting comments and I raised questions that indicated implications that their comments suggested.

Fourthly, all my classes involve writing, which gives me another mode for providing students with feedback, an area where my evaluations consistently show excellence. In class, students learn to think critically in real time. Good writing, however, requires rumination, and rumination in turn leads to better thinking. Because philosophy is uniquely suited to cultivate thinking, it is uniquely suited to cultivate better writing. It is my belief that both humanities and science majors who are philosophically informed are better writers.

Finally, it is of utmost importance to me that students learn the virtue and reward of hard work. My students have expressed to me their great appreciation for my pushing them, requiring more of them, and showing them how to take their work to a new level, regardless of what level they were at when they entered my class.

Evidence of Teaching Excellence
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As evidence of teaching excellence, I provide the average scores received on student evaluations on seven selected topics for all classes that I have taught. Students were asked to score my classes regarding these aspects from 1 to 5, with 5 being the most positive evaluation. Complete student evaluations, including student comments, can be found at my website: www.jshields.org.

	Overall Course Rating	Overall Instructor Rating	Quality of Exams/ Assignments	Instructor Feedback	Invested in Learning	Organized and Prepared	Respectful
Science and Belief, Fall 2017	4.09	4.63	3.91	4.81	4.54	4.54	5
Science and Religious Faith, Fall 2017	4.6	5	4.27	4.6	5	4.4	5
Philosophical Inquiry: The Big Questions Fall 2017	N/A	N/A	4.54	4.19	4.42	N/A	4.77
Reasoning and Writing in the College, Spring 2017	4.67	5	4.78	5	5	5	5
Science and Theism, Spring 2017	4.62	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.83	4.75	5
Science and Religious Faith, Fall 2016	4.6	4.6	4.8	4.67	5	4.87	5
Science and Theism, Spring 2016	3.83	4.5	4	4.83	4.42	4.33	4.92
Science and Theism, Fall 2015	4.33	4.55	4.73	4.66	4.33	4.42	4.88
Science and Theism, Spring 2015	4.33	4.75	4.38	4.58	4.58	4.5	4.66
Science and Theism, Fall 2014	4.57	5	4.81	4.75	5	4.75	5