Teaching Statement

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Students tend to take philosophy classes because of their curiosity about 'big questions'. Students are less likely to come seeing the point of disciplined, rigorous inquiry into such questions. The slow, detailed analysis that those of us in the profession engage in often seems pointless and tedious to them. The challenge for their teachers, then, is to keep the students' curiosity alive—even better, to extend it to questions to which the students have yet to give thought—while pulling them away from the mere assertion of opinion and pushing them to careful, sustained, and disciplined reflection.

Getting students to engage in disciplined reflection is made easier to the extent that the students are convinced that such discipline has a point. Whenever I have occasion to point out how a small difference in one premise leads to a completely different conclusion, I make use of the occasion. Sometimes I have the opportunity to make my point at some length. I once had one especially forthright student complain in class that he couldn't see the point of all the endless distinctions and counterexamples that philosophers make. Why couldn't we just get on with addressing the questions with which we started? I knew that I did not want to dismiss the student's complaint as inappropriate, so I tried providing a few reasons for spending so much time on distinctions and counterexampls. On further reflection later in the day, however, I decided that a further apologia was called for. So I started the next class period by presenting an ordinary medical scenario in which a patient tested positive for a fatal illness. I told the students about the test's reliability, about the disease's prevalence, and about a drug that cures the disease except in cases of fatal allergic reactions to the drug. I then asked the students to estimate the likelihood that the patient actually has the disease and to decide whether she should be given the drug. Only one student came anywhere close to giving the correct answer. I then gave a short lecture on how there are certain problems in which our quick and dirty judgements are almost guaranteed to be wrong and how the only way to get around these cognitive illusions is by careful, painstaking reasoning (in the medical case, by applying Bayes' theorem). I chose to illustrate this by using a medical case because the practical consequences of making the wrong judgement are obvious, but I wanted to suggest to the students that philosophical problems also require careful, disciplined reasoning in order to give us reason to trust our conclusions.

One of my main goals as a teacher is to encourage students to reflect carefully on their beliefs both in light of their own other beliefs and in light of distinctions and objections that they first encounter in the texts we read and in classroom discussion. Furthermore, I want them to be able to do this on their own. I want to instill in them the habit of taking responsibility for their own intellectual development. One of the primary ways of accomplishing this is by emphasizing student contributions to classroom discussions rather than just lecturing to them. I take questions and objections from students seriously and try to give them adequate responses (not so much by telling them what the answer is as by taking sufficient time to explore what might be said in response). Sometimes this means revisiting questions in subsequent class periods, if they weren't adequately dealt with the first time around.

I am also willing to encourage student discussion even at some expense to getting things right. That is, I will permit discussions to go on even if I think the putative problems rely on dubious assumptions; I will not always correct students when they make erroneous claims. There is a balance to be found here, of course, especially since I do not want to leave the more advanced

students frustrated by too many discussions that they can immediately recognize as misguided. But I would rather try to get the more advanced students to provide corrections in the discussions than providing them myself. I want the students to take responsibility rather than falling into thinking of me as a source of spoonfed answers that they need to remember in order to get a good grade.

This sort of classroom dynamic does require that the students have done the assigned readings with some care. My primary means of encouraging that is to assign regular reading responses. I like to make these a bit more challenging than just asking them to raise a question about the text or to raise a putative objection (though even just requiring such simple responses can go a long way). A format I particularly like is to ask the students to identify a claim in the text that strikes them as utterly crazy and misguided and then to explain what might be said on its behalf.[1] Is there a way of interpreting the claim such that it looks less crazy? Are there other commitments that lead the author to this claim? There are several reasons I like this exercise. It makes it clear to the students that I know that some of the claims we are reading sound crazy and that it's okay to say so. Trying to figure out why the authors makes such claims often requires learning about other parts of the author's view and seeing how the different pieces fit together. This process, in turn, helps students see that even such seemingly crazy claims are, nevertheless, often well-motivated. The exercise also seems to engage students more than others that I have tried. And once students have completed an exercise like this they are usually in a good position to contribute to classroom discussions.

Once a good classroom dynamic has developed, I will sometimes hand responsibility to the students explicitly by telling them at the beginning of class that they are to pretend that I am ignorant of the text under discussion and that it is their job to explain it to me, as well as to object if they think another student is explaining it incorrectly. This requires (i) that we have already covered enough material so that they have some idea what is going on and (ii) that they have done the readings with some care. It also requires a certain classroom dynamic that probably cannot be achieved with every group of students. But if the right conditions are in place, it can work very well in getting students to take initiative and try to work through problems themselves. I have been pleasantly surprised at how sophisticated even introductory students can be when they really get into the project of sorting through a text, figuring out what the interpretive options are and what should be said about the arguments being made.

[1] I borrowed and adapted this idea from Jonathan E. Adler's 'Reading and Interpretation: A Heuristic for Improving Students' Comprehension of Philosophy Texts' (published in *Teaching Philosophy: Theoretical Reflections and Practical Suggestions*, ed. by Tziporah Kasachkoff [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998]).