Teaching Statement

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Some of my central teaching goals are as follows: to create a sense of belonging among my students, to develop their philosophical skills, and finally to generate an excitement for philosophy. In what follows, I detail strategies that I use to effectively meet each of these goals.

I)   Developing philosophical skills

Many of the skills that are crucial to doing philosophy well are also valuable beyond the classroom. These include critical reading and writing skills, learning how to express oneself clearly, and how to re-construct, object to, and defend arguments. Below I detail two strategies that I have found to be especially effective in developing these skills.

First, throughout the semester I hold a series of several in-class small group workshops titled "The Philosopher's Toolkit." In these workshops, students learn and try out various philosophical skills in a "low-stakes" setting. For example, in the first few workshops of the semester students learn about the concepts of soundness and validity, necessary and sufficient conditions, deductive vs inductive reasoning, and effective ways of making philosophical objections, before testing their comprehension by completing small group activities with their peers. (I have included some sample activities in section VI of this portfolio.)

Second, I try to scaffold major assignments with relevant skill building exercises. In my Philosophy of Sports class, for example—in which students write final papers on one of the applied moral issues that we cover—I use the "Philosopher's Toolkit" workshops in the latter half of the semester to work on the components of their assignment. For example, students practice re-constructing arguments that we've covered and coming up with their own original objections or defenses. This is essential practice for developing the set of skills that enables my students to write excellent final papers.

II)   Creating a sense of belonging

My second central teaching goal is to create a sense of belonging among my students. When students feel that they belong, they are more likely to speak up, engage, participate, and ultimately succeed. Below I detail some of the strategies that I have found to be especially effective in fostering students' sense of belonging.

First, not only do I take the time to get to know my students, but I also create the space for my students to get to know each other. For example, at the beginning of each semester, I have started doing ice breaker activities in small groups before returning to larger ice breaking activities as a class. I have found that when I have my students first get to know each other, they are more willing to open up on the first day. This also sets a tone for small group and classroom discussion in the future. By getting use to talking to each other in class, a sense of being a part of a community of learners can grow, which is vital for fostering a sense of belonging.

Second, I am mindful of my classroom presence. Students may feel that they don't belong in a particular learning environment if their contributions are misunderstood, dismissed, or unconstructively criticized. In light of this, I often rephrase what a student seems to be

saying, checking in to see if I have understood before responding. In addition, I try to never dismiss any student contributions. Typically, if a college student has the courage to speak up in class, there is usually some insight, or alternative perspective, that advances the discussion, even if it may need to be teased out. Lastly, I am mindful of whose contributions I am routinely praising or criticizing. I try to be equitable in this, but I also try to ensure that my criticisms are constructive and help students advance their understanding.

Finally, I am intentional about the design of my assignments. If students do not know why they are being asked to do something, or if they do not believe that they can succeed, then they are more likely to disengage and fall into the trap of thinking that a course may not be for them. In light of this, I am sure to explain the rationale behind my assignments. Specifically, I explain why I am assigning it, the outcomes that I'd like to see, and in what way a particular assignment may be relevant to a student's life in and out of the classroom. In addition, I also include plenty of student examples and opportunities for feedback throughout the assignment process. All of this helps to ensure that my students believe that they have what it takes to succeed in my courses.

III)   Generating an excitement for philosophy

My third and final central teaching goal is to generate excitement for philosophy. Below I detail some of what I have found to be especially effective in reaching this goal.

First, I try to make course content relevant to my students. Students are more likely to stay engaged in a course when they understand why what we are studying matters or is valuable. Some specific things that I do to accomplish this are connecting individual topics to a wider course narrative and explaining how what we are learning may serve my students in other aspects of their lives. For example, I take the time to explain how even an apparently dry topic such as the nature of sports is worth investigating because it will help them to understand the distinctive value(s) of sports which will enable them to think more deeply about other human activity and what is ultimately worth doing in this life.

I have also found—especially when covering historical philosophy—that it pays to show students that even very abstract topics, such as the nature of reality, are discussed and explored by philosophers because they were often tied to pressing and real concerns for people at the time. For example, placing Descartes' investigations into the natures of mind and matter into the scientific and religious context of the Copernican revolution—which demanded a new theory of the nature of reality—helps to get across to students why people cared, and still do care, so much about trying to get these natures right.

Finally, I make a concerted effort to break down complex material and to put it in terms that my students can understand. For example, in introducing the Buddha's idea that even getting what we want may lead to future suffering, my students and I recently related this to the classic hip-hop song "Mo Money, Mo Problems." While there are certainly important differences between the two ideas, this was a hilarious connection that made the idea more relatable, which we were then able to build upon.

By breaking ideas down and putting things in terms my students understand, I have found more opportunities for these sorts of connections. When philosophy becomes understandable and relatable, it speaks to students. And when that happens, an excitement for it becomes palpable.