

Some Thoughts on Pedagogy

I want to make students feel the force of the questions asked in philosophy, to recognize that these questions don't go away if we don't ask them, and to feel that they are the kinds of questions that they could genuinely answer if they pursued them carefully enough. To achieve this, I am very careful in how I present my own attitude towards difficult philosophical questions. Rather than being immediately excited and trying to persuade them to be excited too, I stumble into problems that then seem to call for answers (even if we wanted to ignore them). The result of this exploration leads students to respect certain issues they may not otherwise care about. I want students to care about philosophy, but I think it is more important to get students in the habit of respecting issues that may not immediately affect them.

It is an often-overlooked aspect of teaching that we can influence the attitude students take towards what they are learning. Students in a philosophy class expect to be exposed to interesting philosophic content, and they may hope to develop the sought-after skillset of analytical thinking. We need to deliver on these expectations, but I think that teaching philosophy in particular provides an invaluable opportunity to emphasize the manner in which analytical skills should be used. After all, this is a skillset that will not only help students professionally; it is essential to the thoughtful practices constitutive of being a reasonable citizen.

Critical and argumentative abilities should be exercised with empathy, respect, and charity for interlocutors. To achieve this, I emphasize collaboratively assessing views over having cutting debates, and I focus on recognizing reasons over giving long, technical arguments. When I engage with students, my goals are to keep the discussion on track and to paraphrase the points of students as charitably as possible *no matter what they say*. This skill of charitable paraphrasing is something students appreciate (it certainly makes them more willing to contribute in class). More than this, however, it helps to foster within students the attitude that this skill embodies. We want students to respect that worthwhile points are made by others. We also want students to be in a mode of always trying to understand and clearly reconstruct what they hear.

One area where it is particularly difficult for students to maintain this engaging and charitable attitude is in the reading of philosophers throughout history. Philosophy is lucky to have such a rich past, but we should acknowledge the challenges of teaching these works and have strategies for handling them. Bringing in the history of philosophy is an important element of any class (when it is not the entire subject of its own class), but it risks both alienating students and giving the false impression that philosophy has made no progress. To make a start against these problems, I work hard to humanize both the historical figures and the scholars that study them. For example, if we are reading Kant, this begins with explaining the style of his writing given the historical context, and with being upfront about just how difficult he can be to read even for the well-trained. I also like to mention anecdotes to make historical figures seem more relatable (or at least less intimidating), or to connect these figures to pop culture references. With characters like Socrates, this is easy and fun. This strategy helps to disabuse students of the façade of genius and to communicate that the famous philosophers in the canon are just smart people with understandable concerns.

By tracing the big questions through the history of philosophy up to the present, I try to show students that true philosophical progress does not have to mean complete and final answers. Instead, students are able to see how complex these issues can be and how reasonable people can disagree about them. Students should walk away with a better understanding of their own views on the issues; however, my hope is that they leave with an even more thorough respect for those that disagree with them and for the depth of the issues themselves.