

MY APPROACH TO TEACHING

OVERVIEW

My approach to teaching is founded on the belief that effective classrooms function as collaborative communities in which students and instructors work together to gain skills, knowledge, and a greater appreciation of their intellectual capabilities. I believe that everyone enters the classroom with a unique perspective and learning is most effective when it incorporates as many of these perspectives as possible. Thus, my job as an instructor is not to impart students with my knowledge but to facilitate classroom interactions that allow everyone to maximize both their contribution to the pedagogical process and their own individual growth.

One consequence of this approach is that I am constantly striving to help students gain confidence in their intellectual abilities. During my years of teaching, I have found students' struggles more often arise from a lack of self-belief than a lack of intellectual ability. Too often, students enter the classroom convinced that their prior academic records illustrate inherent intellectual shortcomings, and consequently, they are unmotivated to engage with topics they believe they could never understand. Thus, one of my main responsibilities as an instructor is to help students overcome these preconceptions and gain a proper appreciation of their own capabilities. Towards this end, I present information in ways catered to my students' interests and allow them to steer the discussion in whatever ways enable them to contribute most effectively. My aim every semester is to get each student to leave class with a better appreciation of their own abilities and an increased willingness to use these abilities throughout their lives.

My belief in the importance of a collaborative classroom also guides my student interactions. While I will discuss my classroom management more below, a guiding principle I wish to highlight here is my conviction that my being the instructor does not, itself, make what I have to say worthy of my students' attention. I firmly believe that my students' time is valuable and that I must always strive to make what I say worthy of that time. Thus, I aim to be both instructional and entertaining, and I take the time to explain why I think the things discussed in class are worth studying. I also get to know my students as people and ensure that they feel like respected members of the class. I arrive 10 to 15 minutes early in order to talk to my students about their lives and interests, and I try to be as flexible as possible when meeting outside class time. I have found that simply being interested in their lives and being willing to have Zoom meetings at the times that work best for them—including evenings and weekends—helps my students realize that what they have to say is worth hearing. Getting to know my students also helps me guide discussion in ways catered to their interests, increasing engagement throughout the semester. In these ways, I try to ensure that no student feels taken for granted and help them see that everyone has the ability to meaningfully contribute to the learning process.

A final characteristic of my pedagogical approach is that I never take myself too seriously. I have found one of the best ways to help students believe in themselves is to highlight my own limitations. This enables students to realize that intellectual engagement does not require complete

mastery but merely a willingness to bring one's own knowledge and experience to bear on some issue. Thus, I always point out my own fallibility and stress that there are topics about which my students are more knowledgeable than I am. Furthermore, I always note when I am unsure of something and encourage my students to challenge anything I say. I also emphasize that my being a cisgendered white man undoubtedly influences what I say in ways I may not appreciate, and I encourage my students to highlight any biases they think I might have. Whenever class touches on topics of injustice, I encourage my students to think critically about the fact that a white man is leading these discussions and am quick to point out that many of them have far more firsthand experience with these matters than I do. I have found that being forthright about my own limitations helps students feel more respected and helps them appreciate the degree to which their classroom contributions are invaluable.

Overall, my approach to teaching has been highly successful. New students often tell me they signed up for my class on the recommendation of a friend, and every semester, students inquire about the other classes I teach. Often, these students had no prior interest in philosophy. Furthermore, because I get to know my students, I am able to provide useful insights about other philosophy classes they are likely to enjoy.

But while I have the utmost confidence in my overall pedagogical approach, I am also always striving to grow as an instructor and find new, potentially more effective ways of teaching. To give a better understanding of my teaching and how I hope to grow as an instructor, I will now discuss my course design, my classroom management, and the ways I hope to develop further in the future.

COURSE DESIGN

I have been fortunate enough to teach undergraduate classes of all levels. I have taught introductory classes on the problems of philosophy and critical thinking, intermediate classes on computer ethics and the philosophy of psychology, and an advanced seminar investigating language from a cognitive science perspective. While different courses have had different demands, my desire to make the classroom a collaborative, learning environment leads all my classes to have certain features.

My courses begin with a discussion of what the class is about and why I believe it is worth taking. This helps me demonstrate that I do not take my students time for granted and sets the tone for the semester. I also ask my students to share why they are taking the class, which helps them see their importance in the classroom. These practices continue throughout the semester. Whenever the topic changes, we discuss why the new one is worth investigating and how it might be relevant to my students' everyday lives. Taking the time to consider why something is worthwhile both helps students integrate what they learn and helps me guide discussion in ways that are maximally relevant.

Another common feature of my courses is the tendency to shift my approach throughout the semester. The semester always begins with a general overview of the theoretical landscape and a discussion of the key concepts and frameworks that will be utilized throughout. For instance, my

computer ethics courses always begin with a discussion of ethical theories in general. We then use these tools to investigate a number of self-contained topics. For example, in my philosophy of psychology class, we use general considerations about how the mind works to investigate the nature of evil. The final segment of the semester is always guided by the needs and desires of my students. In my intermediate and advanced level classes, I leave several weeks open and ask students to vote on the topics they wish to cover. Not only does this help students remain interested late into the semester, it provides them a further way to shape the course. I also include classes for students to discuss their final papers. In my introductory classes, this involves discussing the whys and hows of argumentative paper writing, while, in my seminars, students present their term paper topics and provide one another with feedback. Reserving class time to discuss papers helps reduce the stress of paper writing and allows students to write in creative ways.

Another feature common to my courses is my willingness to be flexible and cater to the needs of my students. Throughout the semester, I monitor which topics give rise to the most engagement and ask students which ones they find most interesting. Whenever students find a topic especially fascinating or boring, I adjust the syllabus to reflect their preferences. I have found that being willing to modify the class increases the collaborative feeling in the classroom and helps students feel more invested.

My belief that students are valuable members of the classroom community also shapes my approach to assessment. I generally provide several distinct methods of assessment to ensure that no student feels the course is biased against their particular skillset. I also include a number of low-stakes writing assignments, graded for completion. These assignments allow students to work on developing skills without the pressure of having to worry about a grade. In these assignments, students are often willing to take creative risks, which helps them further develop their confidence.

Another feature common to my classes is that I always assign at least one argumentative paper, for, I believe argumentative writing is one of the most valuable skills an undergraduate can learn. Not only does it give students practice organizing their thoughts, it also gives them experience that is directly relevant to writing the cover letters and resumes that will help them find fulfilling careers. I am always very intentional about how I assign papers. Rather than simply telling students to write a paper, I always spend at least one class period explaining why argumentative paper writing is a valuable skill and explaining what a successful philosophy paper looks like. Towards this end, I both describe my own writing process and give a general outline of what successful papers are like. I also provide tips for writing more clearly and provide students with a sample paper I wrote that is designed to show what applying these tips looks like in practice. I have found that explicitly stating my expectations and providing tips reduces students' anxiety and helps them focus their energy on creatively designing their arguments. Telling students about the relevance of argumentative papers to things like job applications also makes the writing process less unpleasant.

For the paper assignments themselves, I generally ask students to respond to one of several detailed prompts that allow them to engage with the material in interesting ways. For instance, rather than simply telling students to define privacy and explain why it is important, I ask them to

imagine that New York City replaced subway cards with facial scanners and to assess whether this system should be allowed to continue. These prompts greatly increase students' creativity and further decrease the unpleasantness of the writing process. Indeed, students sometimes tell me they enjoyed writing a paper for my class and even discussed the prompt with family and friends. In the days leading up to a paper's deadline, I am also willing to read students' drafts and provide detailed feedback. In these ways, I help my students realize that my main concerns are to help them improve their writing and to gain the confidence to engage with complex ideas in creative ways.

A final feature of my courses concerns how I choose the assigned readings. Every semester, I try to provide my students with a variety of readings, both in terms of the types of readings and their authors. Because my students come from a diverse set of backgrounds, I find it useful to provide readings of various styles and lengths. Often, I include a short, current events story or op-ed alongside a book chapter or research article. Allowing students to engage with topics in several ways can greatly improve their understanding, and I hope to incorporate even more diverse sources of information—such as podcasts—in the future. I am also always striving to increase the representation amongst the authors I assign during the semester, and I am very intentional about including readings from authors who are members of traditionally underrepresented groups. While I have not yet achieved the level of diversity I would like, I believe that striving to provide a more varied set of authors helps students feel valued in the classroom, regardless of their race, gender, or cultural background.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

My desire to make the classroom a collaborative learning environment also influences how I manage my classes on a day-to-day basis. In particular, I always strive to make class both informative and enjoyable, while ensuring that every student feels respected.

In order to avoid monotony, I utilize different teaching strategies on different days. Thus, I intersperse group activities and structured discussions amongst my interactive lectures. When beginning a new unit, I usually divide students into groups of 4 or 5 and have them work together to answer a series of questions that are designed to draw out their commonsense understandings of topics like morality and humor. I give students between 15 and 30 minutes to answer these questions and encourage them to be creative with their answers, sometimes offering a token amount of extra credit to the most creative group. I also tell the groups to give themselves a name, a seemingly irrelevant request that greatly increases class camaraderie. I have also had success with jigsaw activities in which each group is given a different short reading on a particular topic and answers a series of questions about it. Each group then presents their reading and their answers to the class and, together, we discuss how to synthesize these various data points.

I have also had success building discussions around individuals' answers to particular questions. For instance, I have shown short videos and asked students to answer questions about them. These, then, serve as the basis for a general discussion. On the suggestion of a colleague, I also incorporate short writing assignments into my lectures. When I wish to hear from a more diverse group of

students, I put three minutes on a timer and tell students to write down their answer to some question. I, then, ask students to share their answers with the class. Giving students the opportunity to first write down their answers increases the number who are willing to speak up, furthering the class's collaborative feel.

When I do lecture, my lectures are always interactive. Instead of simply providing my students with information, I incorporate many easy-to-answer questions designed to draw out key ideas. Not only does this increase engagement, I find that students remember information better when they present it themselves. I also pose more complicated questions designed to foster discussion, and I encourage my students to interrupt me at any point to ask questions, raise objections, or discuss the implications of something I've said. To facilitate this, I incorporate pauses of up to a minute so students have time to gather their thoughts. Whenever a student asks a question, I give their classmates a chance to respond before I jump in, but I always make sure to listen carefully to what every student has to say. On those occasions where I struggle to understand a student's question or comment, I take responsibility for the lack of understanding to ensure the student does not feel discouraged. I also ask follow-up questions and try to paraphrase what they said in my own words to help ensure that everyone in class can appreciate their point. I find that actively engaging with all questions and comments increases student participation because students never fear that they will be dismissed. Indeed, student engagement tends to grow as the semester progresses; as more students realize that anything they say will be taken seriously, more of them are willing to talk.

The way I carry myself in the classroom is also designed to make each student feel valued. One way I do this is by striving to make everything I say worthy of my students' attention. By temperament, I am energetic and enthusiastic, and my lectures are somewhat performative in nature. I tend to move around the entire room and use bodily movements to emphasize certain points. I also try to illustrate key concepts and ideas by relying on unexpected actions or examples. For instance, I demonstrate the nature of social norms by breaking one in a harmless way, such as by standing on a desk or laying on the floor. I find that causing my students to feel surprise when learning a key concept is one of best ways to help them remember it. Furthermore, taking the time and energy required to be entertaining makes it clear that I do not take my students' time for granted. To further this feeling of respect, I maintain an open body posture and eye contact throughout class. I have learned to write while facing my students, and I make sure to shift my gaze around the classroom so no student feels overlooked. I also try to positively reinforce any student who speaks up, both with verbal encouragement and nonverbal cues. Finally, I often remind my students that the material we cover is difficult and recognizing that you do not understand something merely demonstrates a willingness to engage with the material in a serious way. This helps students recognize that the aim of the class is individual growth and encourages them to speak up whenever they have questions.

There are several other techniques I use to make my students feel valued. I always learn my students' names early in the semester and call on them by name. I also try to learn to pronounce each student's name before the first day of class, for, I have found that correctly pronouncing a

typically mispronounced name on the first try is one of the quickest ways to make students feel respected. Furthermore, I begin every class with a short summary of the previous class, both to jog students' memories and to help those who were absent the previous class better follow along. I also highlight how each class fits into the overall semester and encourage students to think of how classroom discussions apply to their lives more generally. This helps students feel more invested and gives them the confidence to apply what they learn in their everyday lives.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

While I feel confident in my teaching, I recognize that there are ways I can improve still further. Indeed, I am always striving to find new techniques that will allow me to better serve the student population. In line with my desire to make my classroom a collaborative learning environment, I hope to incorporate more peer review assignments so that students have more opportunities to assist one another with their writing. I am also looking at ways to include student presentations and in-class debates so that students can engage with class material in more active ways.

I also plan to continue utilizing all available resources to further improve my lecturing. During the pandemic I recorded my Zoom sessions, in part so I could find ways to improve my online lecturing. In the future, I plan to record my in-person lectures so I can improve these as well. Additionally, I plan to continue asking more experienced colleagues for helpful tips, and asking my students what they think worked and what they think did not. I find these suggestions incredibly useful; I began writing sample papers on the suggestion of one of my classes. I plan to continue relying on my students' insights going forward. In these ways, I hope to continue honing my pedagogical techniques so that I can better serve my students in the years to come.