

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

THOSE WHO CAN MAKE YOU BELIEVE ABSURDITIES CAN MAKE YOU COMMIT ATROCITIES. —VOLTAIRE

Both well-supported and unsupported beliefs can be dangerous, as a person's beliefs can cause him to murder, hate, condemn, perpetuate lies, etc. What bothers me about unsupported beliefs is that they are often easily avoidable, and so the harm that they cause is also often easily avoidable. Unfortunately, unsupported beliefs are abundant, as people frequently fail to exercise disciplined control over what they believe. My enthusiasm for teaching philosophy stems from the fact that I not only enjoy discussing philosophical topics but also strongly believe that the tools that philosophers use to assess the logical coherence, factual adequacy, and strength of arguments are both tremendously important and underused. As a result of this conviction, my primary goal in the classroom is to strengthen my students' ability to critically evaluate arguments. I also strive to make my students reflect upon and challenge their own views. And a third major goal of mine as an instructor is to improve my students' writing skills.

Fostering the ability to critically evaluate arguments involves teaching students how to understand language, identify the relationships between different ideas, recognize faulty reasoning, fairly weigh evidence, and assess the quality of different types of arguments. Although these skills are applied in all philosophy courses, philosophy instructors often overlook the importance of explicitly discussing them in courses on topics other than logic or informal reasoning. Omitting this discussion is problematic because not all undergraduates have strong backgrounds in these areas, and they need sharp analytical skills to be capable of doing philosophy well. For this reason, I always discuss common mistakes people make when they read and evaluate arguments, and I have students practice distinguishing good reasoning from bad. When these common mistakes are clearly understood early on in the course, students are able to avoid them and can recognize them elsewhere throughout the semester. This results in there being more advanced classroom discussions and allows us to tackle more challenging topics. I begin each semester by asking students to evaluate a few arguments about issues relevant to the course topic, and I end the semester by asking students to evaluate the same arguments. It is rewarding to see how the course has shaped the way that students think. The critical thinking skills cultivated in philosophy classes help students strengthen and better understand their own beliefs, and they equip students to flourish in any profession.

In the classroom I also strive to challenge my students' standing opinions and to get them in the habit of recognizing potential weaknesses in their own views. Showing them that reasonable, well-meaning, clear-thinking individuals can end up on either side of many debates is valuable for a number of reasons. First, tempering the temptation to villainize one's opponent is important because giving in to this temptation can prohibit someone from reaching a compromise that both she and her opponent would be satisfied with. Second, developing a deeper understanding of one's opposition helps a person more accurately pinpoint the true source of disagreement and more effectively defend his position. Third, acknowledging the weaknesses in one's own view prevents that person from overreaching. In order to accomplish this goal, I select topics that are controversial and present the strongest arguments that I can find for opposing views. I try not to include a topic unless I can present a fairly strong argument for both sides of a debate. For example, in an ethics course, I might include topics such as biomedical enhancement; the value and danger of patient autonomy in medical decision-making; intervention on the domestic and international levels; moral obligations to strangers; or secular arguments for and against abortion. Students tend to enter the

course with strong opinions on these topics, and it is interesting to see them come to more fully appreciate the weight of their opponent's objections. Another way that I help students better understand their opponent's perspective is to show them the complexities of various debates and the many different positions available to them. For example, it is often thought that the abortion debate boils down to a disagreement about the time at which the creature growing inside the woman counts as a person, or a being with moral status. And this view is common because people often assume that everyone agrees that it is always wrong to kill a person. However, in ethics classes, I like to discuss Judith Thompson's paper *A Defense of Abortion* because it shows students that the aforementioned understanding of the abortion debate is too simple and demonstrates the need for a more fine-grained explanation of why abortion is or is not morally wrong. Another topic that draws students' attention to the commonly overlooked complexities of a debate is moral relativism. Students often think that there are only two views on moral objectivity that are available to them: the view that there is a *single* correct answer to moral dilemmas, and the view that *all* answers are equally correct. Many students have never seriously considered the view that some, but not all, answers to moral dilemmas are correct, and many students find this moderate position appealing. Discussing topics like these shows students that many debates have important nuances that are often overlooked and that their opponents may have better support for their views than students initially thought. I do not mean to suggest that I attempt to make students wishy washy about what they believe, or that I consider it undesirable for people to hold strong opinions. I simply consider it undesirable to take a stand prematurely, so I try to foster an appreciation for subtlety and to show students that there are often many questions that they should answer before reaching a conclusion.

A third major goal of mine is to improve my students' writing. More specifically, I try to teach students how to write more concisely, stay on topic, state their ideas more accurately, and organize their papers in a way that most clearly conveys their points. In order to do this, I have students review drafts of their classmates' papers using a handout that asks them to provide feedback about specific features of the paper they are reviewing. Another way that I help students improve their writing is by providing them with an example of what I consider to be a good paper, as well as a philosophy paper of mine from college that could use significant revision. I then walk them through the problems with the weaker paper and explain what changes I would make to improve it. This is also a valuable activity because many people are self-conscious about having someone evaluate their writing, and showing students that I have been where they are makes them more comfortable sharing their work with me. Further, it shows students that they are capable of becoming better writers. I think that one of my strengths as an instructor is that I take the time to give thorough feedback on all writing assignments and comment on content, style, and grammar. Students have expressed that they have learned a lot from these comments. My gratitude for the help that I have received with my own writing and my belief that writing skills are valuable in any discipline make teaching students how to write well a priority for me.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

In addition to thinking about what skills or knowledge I want students to walk away from my classes with, I also have more general goals for myself as a teacher—goals that are not content-related. One of the most important is that I want students to be engaged. If students find the material interesting, then class will be more enjoyable for everyone, and students will learn more. However, accomplishing this goal requires conscious effort and planning. Certain topics are not intrinsically fascinating to everyone, but instructors can usually do something to help make a topic more appealing. For instance, some complain that formal logic can be dry, but the logic course that I took as an undergraduate was perhaps the most entertaining class that I have ever taken, due to my professor's use of clever, funny examples to illustrate the rules of logic. Some might think that humor distracts from the key ideas, but I think it often has the opposite effect-- it helps attract

student attention and makes the key ideas stick. In my courses, I try to insert relevant, entertaining attention-grabbers when possible. For instance, when teaching logical form, I have students identify logical forms in passages from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Don Quixote*; when teaching game theory, I have asked students to apply what they have learned about sequential games to a situation in which pirates are fighting over booty; and when teaching informal fallacies, I have shown video clips from *South Park* that poke fun at poor reasoning. To attract student interest, I also try to demonstrate the relevance of what we discuss to the world outside the classroom. For example, when we have discussed entailment, I have provided a White House Press Briefing in which a reporter thinks that the Press Secretary's claims entail a certain conclusion and asked students to analyze whether the reporter is correct; when we have discussed the relationship between testimony and justification, I have pointed out the role that testimony often plays in our scientific and religious beliefs; and when we have discussed the nature of different types of evidence, I have had students think about specific court cases in which different types of evidence were used to reach a verdict.

GOING FORWARD

Developing as a teacher is obviously an ongoing process, and undoubtedly there are weaknesses in my performance as an instructor. For instance, with class sizes of approximately 20-45 students, Duke's philosophy department provided me with an ideal environment for getting accustomed to teaching. However, I realize that in the future I may be instructing classes composed of 200+ students and that this will require a different approach. A few of my colleagues and I have periodically observed each other teach and have provided each other with feedback and suggestions for improvement. By observing my peers in other departments teach, I have learned techniques for teaching and assessing larger groups and have witnessed these methods in action.

These peer exchanges have also provided me with much helpful insight about my own teaching. I also collect feedback about my teaching from my students at the end of each course that I teach. Students complete surveys that are tailored to the course so that I know how effective students perceive me to be, and so that I can identify any weak points that I need to attend to.

My belief that what philosophers teach is important motivates me to address weaknesses in my performance as a teacher so that I am as effective as possible. I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to help students become more reflective, careful thinkers and to watch young minds develop. Further, I am grateful for what I have learned from them—my students' ideas have challenged me, their curiosity has excited me, and their creativity has inspired me. I truly cannot imagine a more rewarding job.