

Teaching Statement

My main objectives in the philosophy classroom are, one, to teach students how to reconstruct and evaluate arguments and, two, to create an engaging learning environment where all students feel comfortable contributing, especially those who are inclined to be reticent. I have been the primary instructor of four courses – one undergraduate course on the philosophy of death and three iterations of an applied ethics course for advanced high school students (offered through the Summer@Brown Pre-College Program) – each of which were structured around these two objectives.

Towards the first objective, I begin the first day of class with a crash course on arguments. The crash course walks students through the basics of philosophical argumentation: how to discern when an argument is being made, how to pick out its content and structure, how to formalize it, and how to criticize it by targeting its premises and inferences. Together, we practice reconstructing and evaluating simple arguments from everyday scenarios, and then we practice on a philosophical argument. Throughout the course, I model this process in class. For each day's reading, we reconstruct the author's main argument, and evaluating that argument guides that day's discussion. The course grade is largely based on students' ability to implement this process on their own, which they demonstrate in their written work. I assign a few short papers. In the first half of the paper, students are to charitably and accurately explain an argument from one of the class readings and then, in the second half, offer their own original evaluation of that argument.

The ability to reconstruct arguments is one of the most valuable skills students gain in the philosophy classroom, serving them well in college and beyond. Students encounter arguments all of the time: in op-eds, during political debates, at church and school, and around the dinner table. So often students are in a rush to share their own thoughts that they respond to another's argument without fully grasping it, leading to confusion, strawmen, and talking-past. Pausing to reconstruct the argument prevents all this, and promotes a habit of understanding before reacting. It also helps students approach texts that seem big or intimidating, breaking them down into bite-size pieces. This, in turn, fosters clear and focused writing. Reconstructing a text's arguments compels students to figure out which parts of a text are relevant, and which parts are not, as they put the argument into their own words.

The ability to properly evaluate arguments is just as valuable as the ability to reconstruct them. Students often claim to "just disagree" with another's view but cannot say more. This is not only unproductive, but also frustrating to their interlocutors. Teaching students to object to premises and inferences enables them to locate the point of disagreement, letting the dialogue to move forward. Knowing how to evaluate an argument also puts students in a position to construct better arguments of their own. When students regularly practice evaluating others' arguments, they can recognize and avoid questionable inferences and premises as well as anticipate objections. In addition, students who judge arguments on their relevant merits do not fall for fallacious reasoning that is couched in persuasive rhetoric or dismiss a good point that is spoken with timidity.

Toward the second objective, my approach is based largely on my own experience of being a quiet student who often felt out of place in the rough-and-tumble of undergraduate philosophy classrooms. Not only was I scared of saying something that seemed obtuse, but I also had trouble inserting myself into discussions with students (usually men) who spoke with the confidence that I sorely lacked. In addition, it always took me more time than others to collect my thoughts in order to have something to say so that, often, by the time I was ready to raise my hand, the discussion had moved on. This was all profoundly discouraging, and almost dissuaded me from studying philosophy: I felt like I was not a productive member of the classroom community. I worried I was missing the qualities that make for a good philosopher.

I never want students to give up philosophy because they do not have the demeanor of a stereotypical philosophy student, so every course I teach is designed to accommodate and encourage students who typically feel least comfortable in philosophy classrooms. I know that many of these students dread philosophy courses that weigh participation heavily in the course grade; instead of motivating them to contribute, it often just makes them more anxious about speaking up. In light of this, I count office hour visits and email correspondence about course material toward participation, as well as in-class contributions.

To stave off reticence that flows from the fear of not sounding smart, I respond warmly to every question asked and comment made. I am especially conscientious in how I respond when students say something that misses the mark. First, I work hard to understand what they are getting at and, when it is confused, I try to discern what is underlying the confusion. If there is an underlying insight, I highlight that insight after clearing things up, showing them that they have still contributed something valuable to the discussion. If no such insight is obvious, I will try to draw a connection between what was said and a related or nearby point that is worth making. My students know that whatever they say – confused or astute – will be well-received.

I also make time for plenty of small group discussion during class. Often, I ask students a question and instruct them to break into small groups of two or three to discuss it among themselves before we come back together to discuss it as class. Small group discussions give students who need it extra time to collect their thoughts, and also give students who feel uncomfortable talking in front of the whole class a low-stakes space to voice their thoughts. In addition, small group discussions allow students to try out thoughts on their peers before presenting them to the whole class. Receiving positive feedback from a peer in a small group discussion can embolden less confident students to share their thoughts when we come back together.

Another practice I implement in courses and sections that are small enough – less than 30 students – is “mandatory minute.” Mandatory minute is done at the end of each course unit. I ask students to take a few moments to reflect back on the unit, and to write down either something they learned or something that they changed their mind about. We go around in a circle and each student has a minute to share what they wrote. Mandatory minute gives each student a designated time to speak, accommodating those who typically struggle to insert themselves into big-group discussions. Sometimes, sharing their reflections in mandatory minute breaks the ice for quiet students and moves them to contribute to other whole-class discussions.

Along with being sensitive to the needs of shy and under-confident students, I strive to make class fun and engaging for everybody. Philosophy is difficult. Philosophical ideas can be heavy and abstract, and philosophical texts sometimes compromise accessibility for rigor. To keep students engaged, I constantly remind them of the practical import of the ideas at hand. When we talked about the various accounts of the metaphysics of death in my philosophy of death course, for example, we considered the implications of each of those accounts on the case of Terri Schiavo, and the ethical questions surrounding it. In general, I frequently rely on real-life examples to illustrate philosophical ideas, bringing them down to earth.

Along the same line, in my applied ethics course, I facilitate in-class debates for each issue we study – abortion, immigration, climate change, and so on. The cases and debate structure are loosely based on those of the [National High School Ethics Bowl](#). The purpose of these debates is to have students bring to bear the ethical theory and arguments from the assigned readings and class discussion to a real-life messy moral case. These debates, I tell my students, are not about being right or wrong, and they are not about being persuasive. They are about making good arguments. Debating gives students an opportunity to apply theory to practice, and urges them to see a hot-button issue from a side they might not take themselves.

In sum, I care deeply about equipping my students to reason well, both about course material and about issues they come across outside the classroom. I strive to create a warm and welcoming classroom environment where students are excited to come together and do philosophy. I am especially attentive to the needs of quiet and under-confident students. My experience in the classroom – both as a primary instructor, and as a TA – has prepared me to teach a wide range of courses including epistemology, normative ethics, applied ethics, moral psychology, feminist analytic philosophy, philosophy of religion, social and political philosophy, and critical thinking, among others.

For course descriptions, syllabi, and other teaching materials, feel free to visit annabrinkerhoff.com/teaching.