## STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

*A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes*. – Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

Teaching is not standup comedy, but it is not as different as one might think. Both activities demand a certain rapport, where the presenter agrees to entertain so long as the audience agrees to open up their minds. Humor can be disarming and engaging, can help students get interested in a subject when they might otherwise be bored, and can help them feel comfortable where they might otherwise be ill at ease. Just as good humor can challenge our preconceptions and identify absurdities in the way we think about things, so too can teaching philosophy well. With an imposing and dry writer, like Aristotle, humor can make a text seem friendly and approachable, facilitating real learning.

Beyond creating comfort with difficult texts, my teaching philosophy has the further objectives of cultivating critical and reflective thinking. Critical thinking is the ability to understand, evaluate, and formulate arguments. Reflective thinking involves the recognition of other viewpoints and ways of thinking, and an awareness of one's own biases and limitations. For critical thinking I encourage the skills of active reading and writing, and help students develop an understanding of arguments. For reflective thinking, I develop students' cultural and historical knowledge, and encourage them in the collective exploration of ideas.

From the outset, I encourage active reading and writing because they are fundamental to critical thinking. On every syllabus I teach, I include a short 'how to read philosophy' guide (see attached syllabi), which teaches students to approach every article with a set of questions in mind. I encourage students to take notes, and to outline the arguments they find in their reading. This activity is helpful for good writing, so I require students to write summaries of assigned readings. These assignments are extremely effective at encouraging active reading and writing, and I have had many students who, while initially plotting my death for forcing them to write so much, eventually realized that this assignment was extremely useful not only as a writing exercise, but as a way to study for tests and to use as the basis for larger writing assignments. I always remind my students that, like Kung Fu or shaving, writing takes practice: the only key to good writing is to write, rewrite, and rewrite again.

Critical thinking requires an understanding of arguments, so I teach short lessons about them over the course of the semester. I go over useful terminology (such as soundness, validity, premise, and conclusion), and discuss when and where they will encounter these things (answer: all the time, they're everywhere!). I tell them that when they read, they must first ask, 'What is the conclusion of the argument?', and then, 'What are the premises that establish this conclusion?'. They must then evaluate those premises and judge whether the argument is valid or invalid. During class, I discuss these arguments using this same vocabulary while encouraging students to come forward with their own evaluations and characterizations. On quizzes and tests, I also require students to read a passage and identify its argument. Altogether, these small steps help students considerably with longer writing assignments and arguments in general.

Critical thinking is only one of historian's and philosopher's tools; another is reflective thinking, which is an awareness of the limitations of one's own perspectives and biases in the hopes of mitigating them. This entails encouraging students to develop a skeptical attitude. I have found that the best way to encourage this attitude is by teaching the histories of philosophy and science. The histories of these areas are rife with ideas that seem not just wrong but downright crazy, and yet the people who held these ideas are some of the

[1]As quoted in Norman Malcolm (2001), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 27-28, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

smartest and most insightful philosophers and scientists to have ever lived. By teaching students not only that Galen recommended blood-letting for various ailments, but why he thought this procedure would be helpful, and how he argued and justified his position, students learn that, not only have people thought about, in this case, the human body and disease in different ways, but that, even though we now know they were wrong, they had good reason to believe what they thought, and argued for their positions well.

My commitment to teaching history and philosophy of science stems from my view that it is a study in cross-cultural comparison. As L.P. Hartley wrote, 'the past is another country, they do things differently there'[2]. My approach to teaching is founded upon this commitment: learning about different ways of thinking helps students understand themselves and the modern era in much clearer relief. By studying bygone eras, we can begin to see some of our own biases, blind spots, and prejudices, and we can begin the process of evaluating and mitigating them as far as possible. Students learn about the diversity of human systems of thought, social organization, and ways of life. Learning about these systems broadens students' horizons by letting them understand that the way our current societies and social situations are structured are not only not natural, but that there have been many different and incompatible ways of organizing human interactions. For instance, students might learn about the ways in which sexuality and gender have been conceptualized by philosophers and scientists over the course of history. In the seventeenth century, for example, there was a dramatic increase in wealthy women desiring medical care from university-trained physicians. This led the physicians to start studying, for the first time, the anatomy of females, which, until that point, had been thought of as entirely analogous to male anatomy, only 'imperfect' or even 'deformed'. Indeed, until the latter half of the seventeenth century, what we now call ovaries were called '*testes muliebres*'! I thus hope to help students become culturally and historically aware thinkers.

In pursuit of reflective thinking, it is important for students to ask questions – of me, each other, and themselves – because questions are key to good class discussions. Having good class discussions is difficult; indeed, I have often thought that teachers-in-training should be required to take a course that teaches strategies for 'how to handle long, awkward silences when no one is responding to your questions.' My strategy is threefold. First, I require students to write summaries of the reading, which ensures they have done enough of the reading for us all to be on the same page. Second, I require them to do small group work where they discuss some issue together and report their findings to the class. (For instance, I might split the class up into groups, and assign each group one of Francis Bacon's Idols, and require each group to explain, in their own words and with examples, what Bacon hopes to encourage with that Idol.) Lastly, the most important part of my strategy is to make the students understand that my classroom is a dialogue and not a monologue: learning requires collaboration between students, peers, and teachers.

It is therefore critical to make sure that my classroom is a place where every student feels comfortable contributing her or his thoughts and arguments, and this brings me back to where I started. I have found that if your students can laugh with you (though hopefully not *at* you), they become much more ready to discuss their thoughts and arguments, and then to get down to the very serious, and sometimes hilarious, business of doing philosophy.

[2] L.P. Hartley (1953), *The Go-Between,* New York: New York Review of Books, 17