

Teaching Philosophy: Equity and Belonging in the Classroom

Philosophy professors play an important role in society, and I take that role very seriously. In my view, this role involves equipping students with tools to think critically about nuanced ideas and to communicate effectively about these ideas, both orally and in writing. An education in philosophical thinking is not only suited for those who are in pursuit of a future in academic philosophy; rather, it is for everyone. I intend to apply my pedagogical strategies toward teaching at [REDACTED] in reflection of this fact. This means that in my course design, I discern heavily around the accessibility and inclusivity of curriculum content and its modes of presentation and assessment.

I feel strongly that prioritizing accessibility can avoid any sacrifices in terms of academic rigor, so I hold my students to high standards and expectations. I strive to make sure that they are provided with the tools to meet those expectations regardless of their environmental contexts. I utilize backwards course design strategies to conceptualize my courses, and I am continuously monitoring teaching effectiveness to maximize the alignment of my course objectives with concrete learning activities and assessments. In my student evaluation surveys, I receive positive feedback about my level of enthusiasm, love for the subject area, attention to detail, and care for my students.

How I prioritize individualized attention:

I have been building experience working with diverse student populations since I was a peer tutor and supplemental instruction leader at [REDACTED]. There, I worked with students who came from many different walks of life, with great variance in age, socioeconomic status, educational background, and future plans. It was valuable to have this experience early on because I learned the importance of one-on-one interactions with students, and since then I have been practicing communicative strategies to optimize these interactions.

When I started graduate school at the University of [REDACTED] in [REDACTED], I worked as a teaching assistant for two years, gaining experience with Ethics and Logic. As a TA, I facilitated four weekly discussion sections of 20 students each. I took it upon myself to use these sections to not only review lecture content, but to extend beyond it and apply it to students' real lives. This taught me so much about how to be sensitive to students' level of understanding and their level of interest. My role as a TA was very important, because the students were in large lecture courses with 300+ students, which makes it difficult to build a relationship with the Instructor of Record. As their TA, I was able to build relationships with them that aided in their ability to ask for help when they needed it. For example, when I was a TA for PHIL 1102: Philosophy and Logic, I found that many students struggled with symbolic logic and had difficulty translating the symbols on the page into something that made sense in their mind. Initially, some of these students were afraid to ask for help. I made sure to slow down abundantly when going through worked examples in class, and to offer time for students to work through examples independently or in small groups in discussion sections so that I could go around and build rapport with them. After a few weeks, some of the students who were especially struggling started to feel comfortable enough to ask questions in class and/or come to my weekly office hours, where I was able to devote individualized time to aiding their understanding and their ability to translate the symbols into a language that made sense to them.

Since I have been teaching independently, it has been very important to me to create a sense of community in my classroom and to create a space in which each student feels seen and heard. To this end, I have experimented with a few concrete strategies. When I taught PHIL 1104: “Philosophy and Social Ethics,” I often began the first day of class with a course survey. This survey would ask some questions about the student themselves to help me get to know them and learn their names, since using student names is one way to promote a sense of belonging. I also asked questions about their particular learning style and learning needs, in case there was something I needed to be made aware of. Finally, I asked some preliminary questions about the content area (Ethics), as well as asking them to select or rank particular applied topics that interested them. I would often modify the syllabus based on the interests expressed by my students.

How I select course content to maximize student growth and sense of belonging:

Regardless of the course I am teaching, I always like to include a unit on critical thinking at or near the start. This tactic gives students skills in extracting philosophical arguments and employing language to articulate them. For example, at minimum, every student should be able to read a paragraph of argumentative prose and explain its conclusion. It is also helpful for them to be able to identify its core premises and spell out its structure explicitly. For example, when I teach PHL 213W: “Healthcare Ethics” at [REDACTED], I spend the first week on concepts of moral reasoning. The students have a one-page handout on argumentative fallacies that we do group work on, and we discuss the core ideas behind argumentative conclusions and premises. I design my lectures to be interactive with many intermittent learning checks. I then have them apply what they learned by finding an argument “in the wild” for their first assignment. Students locate somebody on social media or the news who is arguing for a specific claim, and we spend time in class analyzing these real-world arguments from tweets, memes, comics, or even tiktoks. This helps students to see that the structural features of arguments are relevant to real discourse that they already encounter in their daily lives. One student even said that this unit inspired her to advocate for herself in a workplace environment by constructing and articulating a deductively valid argument.

Tools of argument extraction and analysis lay a foundation that aids students not only in navigating the remainder of my course, but based on their feedback, it’s proven to support their performance in their other classes and even personal lives. Armed with argument extraction tools, I aim to train my students to equip themselves with the ability to identify the root of core disagreements they may encounter in their personal, professional, or political lives. With such a politically divisive world climate, it may not be realistic to expect my students to use tools from my class to completely resolve their disagreements, but we have made progress if we can at the very least understand what the disagreements are actually about.

Readings are also important pedagogically, and I aim to select required course readings that reflect my values in diversity and inclusion. When I teach Ethics, I include the “big three” ethical theories (Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and Aristotelian virtue theory), and I also include feminist ethics and ethics of care. It is important to me that my syllabus includes diverse authors because representation from a range of different perspectives enhances student learning, and also promotes inclusivity. When students read work from somebody who they can relate to in some way, the material often has a way of coming alive for them. I also encourage my students to

make connections to media and pop culture in our discussions and their writing, which helps them stay engaged and gives them a point of reference.

How I prioritize incorporating student voices:

Finally, it is critical to my teaching ethic that my classroom includes diverse voices, not only when it comes to the authors on my syllabus, but also my students' own voices. To this end, I am always experimenting with pedagogical strategies that can increase student participation. If offered the role of [REDACTED], I would welcome the opportunity to work with [REDACTED] and other faculty members as we continually hone our pedagogical techniques.

So far, I have found that increasing student engagement requires moving beyond simply "asking a question and waiting for an answer," which typically privileges a small group of outspoken students. Dividing students into small groups can help those who may not feel comfortable speaking to the entire class. Encouraging written forms of participation can also help quieter students feel emboldened to share. I have also found it beneficial to provide students with ownership over class discussions by allocating "discussion leader" responsibilities.

For example, when I taught PHL 213W: "Healthcare Ethics" at [REDACTED] College in the Summer of 2022 in a synchronous online accelerated class, I assigned each student to a particular day. On that day, we would be discussing a particular topic in Healthcare Ethics such as: informed consent, confidentiality, human research and clinical trials, surrogacy, abortion, patient autonomy, or justice. For a portion of class time, the discussion leader would have control of the zoom meeting that day. They were responsible to come prepared with a case study or a related topic that interested them about that day's content and to raise questions to spark discussion amongst their peers. My students took up this task remarkably well and it enabled us to discuss related topics that I might not have thought to include. One student, for example, brought an in-depth look into the specific apps that research facilities use to obtain consent to participate in their studies, to raise questions to her peers about whether checking a box on an app can really constitute informed consent if you are not face-to-face with another human to whom you can raise questions. Another student presented during our unit on justice to talk specifically about injustices toward women of color in birthing contexts, and she advocated for increasing access to doula support during childbirth. I am consistently impressed with my students' abilities to find interesting topics that connect to our course content and have continued to employ the "discussion leader" tactic when teaching Healthcare Ethics in the synchronous online mode.

I have a long-standing conviction that the integration of diverse perspectives is crucially important for addressing any issue, whether it be social, political, ethical, or scientific. I strive in both my teaching and my research to open communicative channels that allow this integration to take place. My strong commitment to diversity and inclusion drives me to create spaces in which people feel a sense of belonging. The interactions with faculty and staff that I have had at Delta have shown me that I can and would feel that sense of belonging as a faculty member there. It has meant so much to me to be part of a community that clearly shares my values in constant pedagogical growth. I would be excited at the opportunity to continue to grow as a teacher in the fertile ground that this community provides, and to pass these gifts on to the students who I am lucky enough to cross paths with.