

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Any coherent philosophy of teaching must be both knowledge-oriented and action-oriented. The love of wisdom, from which the term “philosophy” is derived, includes both a theoretical and practical component. To *love* wisdom is to do more than just learn certain propositions in the abstract sense. It crucially requires an act of will – a personal commitment to shape one’s life in ways that reflect what is true and good. As an instructor, my teaching incorporates both of these elements. I seek to educate the *whole person*. I teach not merely so that my students can know what this-or-that theory is, or what other people thought in the past, but so that they can become *better people*.

A person-centered education must be interdisciplinary. It must be able to integrate ideas into a unified worldview that makes sense. The Greek philosopher Aristotle famously observed that our ability to reason is the defining feature of our humanity. Now whether or not Aristotle was right about the essential nature of human beings, he was certainly right about the preeminent role of reason in our lives. We attempt to formulate and follow life plans that are coherent, ordered, and oriented towards improving ourselves and others. The goal of our academic inquiries is the pursuit of truth, so that we can make sense of reality and how we ought to live. Education, therefore, seeks to develop a coherent model of interpreting the world that can then be applied to issues of practical importance.

This is a tall task, and by no means easy. Reason is a skill that requires immense effort to develop. Accordingly, my teaching methodology is suited towards preparing my students to exercise and hone their own intellectual capacities. When delivering lectures, I am careful to stop and ask thoughtful questions, engage students in Socratic dialogue, and encourage discussion amongst their peers. My goal is not to think for them, but to guide them as they begin to piece together a worldview. Memorizing names, theories, and definitions certainly has its place, but it does not get at the core of what learning is about. My teaching is designed to engage the natural desire to know.

However, knowing is one thing, and doing is another. The *love* of wisdom requires an act of will. Someone who loves wisdom will order his life in ways that reflect what is true and good. Accordingly, my teaching strategies are designed to get students to *apply* the concepts they learn, with the hopes that they may grow in how they think and live. I prioritize “hands-on” assignments, such as presentations and class discussion, more than I do exams and quizzes, since the former allows students to develop and actively apply their critical thinking abilities. By giving persuasive speeches, presentations and fielding questions in front of the entire class, students are forced to think on their own feet.

Of course, as Aristotle also noted, what we *think* makes sense isn’t always what *actually* makes sense. This is why sound instruction is needed. The goal of an instructor is not merely to teach students to reason, but to reason *well*. As a humanities instructor, I am therefore committed to truth. There are right ways and wrong ways to reason, and my goal as an instructor is to equip my students with ability to reason properly and coherently. This can often be a difficult task, especially when faced with so many complex, diverse, and controversial issues. On issues where reasonable people may come to differing conclusions, my solution is to teach the strongest arguments for all

sides, while leaving it to the individual student to make their own judgement about the merits of a position. The search for truth can be quite difficult, and so in the spirit of intellectual humility, I am never dogmatic about my own opinions. This, I think, conveys a proper balance for truth, intellectual humility, and viewpoint diversity.

The success of my approach has been made evident to me time and time again. Groups of students often stay after class to continue discussion of the day's lesson. I have been told countless times that my classes are the most interesting within a student's schedule, precisely because of the discussions that are generated. This kind of experience encourages respect, promotes tolerance, and leads to a healthy kind of skepticism that improves a student's overall experience at the university.