

# Statement on Teaching

Matthew J. Brown

## On the Value of Learning Philosophy

Is there anything to be gained from learning philosophy? Certainly, there is much to be lost. Philosophy calls into question our cherished beliefs. Whether explicitly teaching arguments and reasoning, or trying to understand the nature of scientific knowledge, or trying to get clear on Berkeley's views and why he held them, philosophy teaches students to think carefully about how they reason and what they believe. Philosophy may not make you good, and it might make you more effectively evil; it may not even make you wise, but it will make you more critical and deliberate. Philosophy does not give you a place to rest. A little bit of philosophy may lead you to change your views for the better *or* for the worst. If it really sinks its teeth in you, however, you'll never quite be settled and comfortable with any set of beliefs. At the end of the day, an education in philosophy does not leave one with any sure principles; any new facts learned are incidental, and many putative facts will have been undermined. At best, one is kept awake by nagging questions, about who I am and how I shall live, about what kind of world we live in and how best to understand it.

From one perspective, learning philosophy is destructive; from another, it is liberating. Philosophy liberates by uncovering alternative ways of thinking, acting, and doing. By the careful uncovering and criticism of entrenched habit, custom, and opinion, it opens doors we didn't even know were there. Philosophy fundamentally rejects the injunction to settle for what one has; it requires one to seek what is better in full openness and awareness. If the ideals of freedom, choice, democracy, and growth are to have any meaning, they must be pursued with reflective understanding, not thoughtless reflex. In the breadth of my teaching, from *critical reasoning* to *existentialism*, I have stressed the importance of reflective understanding and one's responsibility for one's beliefs and actions.

## On Lectures

It seems fashionable to eschew lecturing altogether, or at least to denigrate its value and avoid it as much as possible. There are of course many situations in which this is a practical impossibility: when teaching a critical reasoning course of nearly one-hundred fifty students, I have been obliged to do a significant amount of lecturing in

order to communicate the basic material and fairly engage the class as a whole. In all but research seminars at a graduate or advanced undergraduate level, however, I regard completely avoiding lecture as a pedagogical error. No matter how small a class, there is usually a place for this form of instruction. Discussion is a crucial part of the philosophic process, but done exclusively it tends towards the superficial. There is no substitute for the presentation of a sustained argument, a systematic viewpoint, or a synoptic interpretation. These can be offered by readings, of course, but while a text speaks to a fairly generic audience in a static way, a lecture can respond to the particularities of a smaller audience, and it can dynamically adjust to the needs of that audience. In my course on existentialism of roughly thirty students, I devoted about one third of my class time to lecturing, in order to present a systematic view of the texts, their background and argument, and this was greatly appreciated by the students. Of course, many methods must be combined in teaching, and the virtues of inquiry-based teaching active student participation are well-known and undeniable, but they don't provide a basis for avoiding the responsibilities of lecturing altogether.

Students dread a boring lecture, and their negative reactions to inexperienced or incompetent lecturing may lead to a view that lecturing itself is the problem, with the result that even those who are good at it are discouraged from lecturing. Yet students enjoy and learn from a good lecture, and it is usually easy to tell when one has done particularly well. A good lecture teaches not only the content, but also the importance of clear statement, articulate presentation, and engaging public speaking. Becoming skilled at this sort of instruction is difficult, but my attempts to do so have paid off both in the effectiveness and enjoyability of my teaching, and also in the quality of my own work.

Effective teachers must be dynamic and responsive to the needs of their students. They must be aware of whether they are capturing or losing their students. They must encourage feedback, and they must stop to answer questions when it might be important, while tactfully avoiding them when it is important to push on. I have recently been using projected slides and visual aids to improve a lecture. These provide different channels of communication to the student in terms of highlighting key content and providing graphical illustration. I resist any urge to fill the slides with notes and then stand there and read them. Wit and humor have been indispensable teaching tools, as has the serious appeal to what the students care most about.

## **On Writing**

Writing is the central focus of a philosophy course. Reading and lecture exhibit the content and processes of philosophy to some degree, and what is gained in a good discussion is the lifeblood of teaching and learning philosophy, but in the end one must write and write well. In the first instance, writing is an important component of philosophical thinking. You take your vague and inchoate thoughts and force them into careful expression. Only then can you gain the distance necessary to appraise your thoughts, test their mettle, refine them, see where they lead. Writing also

allows communication of carefully considered beliefs, a dialogue without some of the drawbacks of immediate discussion. Everyone can recall a moment in a discussion where they stumbled, said something unclear, or lost the thread of their thought. The written exchange ameliorates these problems. It is no wonder that the written paper is the central tool of assessment, but it is also of necessity an important aspect of instruction. Philosophy professors all too often forget the importance of teaching writing. Having spent time at UCSD teaching freshman writing, where the entire goal was simply to teach the composition of good, essay-length argument, I appreciate the real need for such instruction. Philosophy has its own styles of writing, but the attention to detail, rigor, and criticism in philosophic writing is a boon to writing in any area. Writing is among the most broadly and deeply important skills learned in the entire course of one's education, and philosophy is uniquely placed to contribute, here.

## On Advising

At all levels, advising is an important part of the mission of education. It is not to be understood as the mere imposition of external standards, an attempt to reconcile to the degree possible a student's desires with an institution's requirements. The role of the advisor is *education*; it is to encourage the growth of the student as a person, an intellectual, and as a philosopher. This cannot be done by formula, and it cannot be imposed from the outside. Every student is different, and their differences must be understood, appreciated, and taken into account. Their growth must come from the inside; it can be nourished and encouraged, but it cannot be forced. Some students require a light hand, but too much benign neglect can lead a student to go to seed. Some students require more guidance, but even when heavily involved, it is important to let the student follow their own path. Of course, the student must meet the requirements in a timely fashion, but this can be done in a way that serves the student's growth as well.

While obviously I have little experience in advising students, I have had the great fortune to work with great advisors at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. While at Georgia Tech, I came under the wing of Professor Jon J. Johnston, whose profound influence led me from a computer science with secondary interests in physics and philosophy to become a physics major headed to graduate school in philosophy. At UCSD, I have had to good fortune to work with Paul Churchland and Nancy Cartwright, who have contributed immeasurably to my development. These mentors have had a deep impact on my life, and I regard it as my duty to do at least as well by my own students.

## On the Value of Teaching Philosophy

I find that teaching is of significant value to my personal development. Teaching is not just a way of fulfilling my obligations that make it possible to pursue other interests; it is one of the most rewarding parts of the job. It is true, we all get frustrated by the students or by the doldrums of grading from time to time. Yet, I particularly enjoy the moments when I learn something from a student: when they figure something out before I do or when they provide a fresh perspective and new insights that I had never considered. Not only does it provide genuine intellectual interest, it also provides a bracing reminder to do better in the quest to stay one step ahead of the students. I also enjoy those moments of shared understanding: a shared laugh, an engaged dialogue, or even just the look on a student's face in that "ah ha!" moment.

Teaching also improves my own work. Regularly presenting material to students at various levels requires clarity of statement and the ability to boil things down to essentials. When an idea is confusing or unpersuasive, students let you know it; they rarely have the tact of a colleague in this regard. In contrast with our peers in philosophy, most students don't yet have a well-formed philosophical agenda. They are often very open-minded, and they are always willing to give an honest assessment of your ideas. They lack the sophistication of a professional philosopher, but sometimes what looks like sophistication is really sophistry, in which case a cruder assessment can be of value. Whether teaching near or far from the areas of my personal interests, I find that engagement with students improves the content and form of my own philosophical acumen.