

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Philosophy should make a difference in people's lives. As a teacher of philosophy, I aim to ensure that it makes a difference in my students' lives by generating what I like to call productive discomfort. Students come to our classrooms pre-loaded with messy and unexamined ideas about what the world is like. Part of our job is to unsettle those ideas; not to undermine them, but to challenge them in ways that give students cause to examine them carefully and critically for themselves. This experience can be vertiginous for students, but this discomfort is productive when handled with care and when they are provided with appropriate tools for confronting it. Generating productive discomfort requires the building of trust between teacher and student as well as a little pedagogical finesse. Yet, its role in philosophical education is indispensable. Doing it well is what makes teaching philosophy rewarding and exciting.

In my seven years in front of the classroom, I've developed a method for creating productive discomfort that I deploy in some form in most class sessions. It's a three-act play. Act I motivates the problems we'll examine by prodding students to reflect on relevant experiences in their own lives and undertake some commitments about how they felt, what they thought, and how they acted in those situations. Act II mines the text for theoretical resources that will help us to think more deeply about these experiences, and Act III brings these resources to bear on the commitments undertaken in Act I both to challenge students' unexamined beliefs and to develop a deeper understanding of the world in which we find ourselves. Talking through an example might help to clarify things. When I teach Tommie Shelby's "Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto," I ask students to think about playing on a rec league softball team. They show up to every practice, sell cookies at the team bake sale, carry equipment bags, hit grounders for fielding practice, and generally do everything a good teammate does, yet they never get a chance to play in a game. They're here to have fun, but since some of their teammates take the game a bit too seriously, they never get the chance. They're engaged in a cooperative endeavor, but not reaping the benefits of cooperation. I then ask my students to share stories about times in their own lives when they've been in similar circumstances. Would it be permissible in such cases to stop contributing to the common cause, i.e., to shirk one's responsibilities to the team? Is it acceptable to stop cooperating when we're no longer getting our fair share of the payoff?

Act I aims to disarm students, to get them thinking through cases to which they can easily relate, and to get them to make some pre-theoretical commitments about their responses to such cases. Some of the students—those who did and understood the reading—will be in on the ruse. They'll see where this line of questioning is headed. Many, however, naively play along, and that's just what I want because now they're in the game. They've made some commitments that will later be challenged. These commitments seem low stakes at the time, but as we work the text, they'll come to see that the implications of these commitments run deep and could create some tension with their previously unexamined views.

In Act II, we turn to the text and work together to elicit theoretical insights and tools that will help in the examination of our earlier commitments. Depending on the complexity of the material, Act II might consist in a chalk-and-talk lecture, a guided discussion, or group work analyzing key passages of the text, outlining an argument, or answering a set of questions. In the Shelby case, I use a short lecture to introduce students to some of the basic ideas of social contract theory and the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory on which he relies. I then have them analyze selected passages in small groups to draw out Shelby's claim that a lack of justice in basic social structures—access to education, employment opportunities, etc.—might affect the civic obligations to which we can rightfully hold individuals subjected to those injustices.

With these insights in hand, we pull back the curtains on Act III. Just a few minutes ago, you were arguing that it would be ok for you to stop cooperating if you weren't realizing any benefits. Does that differ structurally from hustling outside the legitimate economy if you don't have equal access to education or employment? For some, their naïve commitments from Act I generate some productive discomfort when confronted with their intuitive resistance to Shelby's position. For others, the position might fit with their earlier commitments, which they can now synthesize within a richer theoretical framework. In either case, we've now got a store of material for further philosophical reflection in the form of continued class discussion, a one-minute paper to wrap up the day, or some other active learning exercise.

My method generalizes beyond ethical subject matters, for most worthwhile philosophical reflection elicits some tension with one's messy, pre-theoretical commitments. The key is to imagine ways to get students thinking about the subjects under examination without explicitly telling them that this is what they're doing. This keeps their shields lowered until it's too late to avoid discussion of thorny issues that, had they been approached directly, might have sent them running for the hills or, at least, for the comfort of their Snapchat feed.

Once they're hooked and feeling a bit uncomfortable, my aim shifts to making this discomfort productive. Part of the process, of course, is introducing students to the tools of philosophical thinking, which they can use to critically examine their own beliefs and, perhaps, to defend them. More importantly, though, to make the discomfort productive, I must meet students where they are intellectually, culturally, and emotionally to help them work through the disorientation of challenging one's worldview. I have success with this in part because most students find me approachable and non-threatening. I come from a rural, working-class background, played college football, and was in a fraternity, so I have some rapport with more conservative students. On the other hand, I talk openly about issues of gender, sexuality, race, and oppression, ask students for their preferred pronouns, and work to make my classroom inclusive along dimensions of class, race, gender identity, sexuality, and opinion, so students with marginalized identities come to see me as an ally. In my experience teaching students at a military academy, a large state university, large private universities, and a couple of small liberal arts colleges I've always found success connecting with students, empathizing with their perspectives, and generating the degree of productive discomfort that they're ready for (even when they think they're not). My course evaluations bear this out. Students say that I'm "willing to hear everyone out," that I'm "great at conducting discussion-based classes," that I have "a great way of getting you thinking", and that a student's "viewpoint feels valued – even when [it is] outnumbered."