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A Multitude of Voices: A Statement of My Teaching Philosophy

“The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.”

—Paulo Freire

“Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies.”

—Jacques Rancière

Teaching philosophy is an inherently political and aesthetic practice. It is political in that philosophy is emancipatory, in Kant’s sense of liberating one from self-perpetuated immaturity. In a broad sense, the goal of *all* college teaching is to enable the student to become a self, to contribute to the student’s ontogenesis by encouraging and enabling her to reflect critically upon and take responsibility for her own ideas, whatever the field of study. But this emancipatory capacity is even more specific to philosophy than to other disciplines, because philosophy engages across all areas of life with the fundamental questions with which human beings make sense of themselves and of their place in the order of things. The teaching of philosophy irreversibly opens the student to the world in all its unapologetic complexity, while at the same time providing the student with concepts and strategies for thinking through this complexity. The result is a lifelong expansion from which there is no turning back – this is what I love most about teaching philosophy.

My part in the process is akin to the role of an artist. My job is not to indoctrinate, but to illuminate new ways of thinking and of understanding the world. Sometimes I offer students new perspectives on questions familiar to them, such as the meaning of suffering or the nature of beauty. Other times I expose them to questions that may never have occurred to them, such as the subtle role of race in legislative and political discussions. The moment the student is comfortable in her conviction, my job is to push deeper and complicate the position. This strategy of ongoing foundational provocation is effective not only in the classroom, but also in intensive, focused settings like independent studies and my direction of senior theses. The goal is not to spur the student to abandon her position, but rather to encourage her to internalize an ongoing commitment to honing her own critical acumen concerning philosophical questions. Successful philosophy teaching entails not only that the student leave the class having retained the textual material, but more importantly, that she has assimilated and strengthened the critical and dialogical element of philosophical practice. In this sense, the philosophy teacher is an artist – contributing to the cultivations of students by enabling them to shape themselves.

Crucial to this process is a multitude of voices. Having begun in higher education as a first-generation, non-traditional college student, I initially faced tremendous anxiety about the fact that I was a few years older than my fellow students, and that I had a family and a full-time job. But I soon realized that these differences gave me a unique perspective. Now, as a teacher myself, I strive to impress upon students my appreciation for the singularity of each voice. Sometimes this means welcoming and encouraging student objections. Today’s students mature in a world vastly different than that of my own adolescence – a world more technologically permeated, global, and multicultural. I encourage them to value the timeliness and uniqueness of their perspectives as indispensable in the task of breathing renewed vitality into our collective engagement with philosophical traditions. I love it when a student poses an objection that knocks me back on my heels. These moments not only expand the horizons of the other students, but they also remind the students that we, students and professor, are learning *together*. I have been given opportunities to teach students at different types of institutions, and from a variety of backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, nationalities, socio-economic statuses, and employment statuses. I cherish the enrichment that each of these differences brings to the ongoing dialogue.

This ‘multitude of voices’ approach also factors into the way I create and conduct my courses. I make a conscientious effort to employ readings and questions that cross differences of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and class. Sometimes this means teaching the Western canon while

complicating its presuppositions about identity and difference. For instance, in my Intro courses, I distribute and discuss articles about gender in Plato's *Republic* and race in Hume and Nietzsche. Sometimes it means complicating a philosophical position by exploring its political implications, such as addressing Heidegger's Nazi affiliation in light of his discussion of historicity and authenticity when I teach Existentialism. Other times, it means launching the semester with a series of challenging questions that will recur constantly throughout the course, like the question of the treatment of women in film that opens my first-year seminar and my Philosophy of Film course. It can also involve complicating the very notion of 'canon' through the use of texts outside the traditional canon. In my Intro courses, I use Shelley's *Frankenstein* to explore the use of sexed language in her descriptions of technology and nature and dissect the relationship between such language and discourses of power and violence; and in my Early Modern course, we read women philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries. In telling the story of philosophy, I like to let unheard voices complicate traditional narratives.

The diversity of voices requires respecting differences in student learning. I build into my approach various styles of teaching and assessment to ensure that all learning types have the opportunity to incorporate the material. Some students love rigorous lectures based upon close readings of texts, while others benefit more from class discussions. I therefore bring an energy to the classroom lecture that is often contagious to the students, such that my lectures frequently spill over into unforeseeable and fruitful discussions. Fostering discussion also requires relinquishing control to some extent, and I am quite comfortable in doing so. Part of the excitement of teaching is being unable to anticipate what will happen in class on a given day, or what will light up a particular student's interest. At the same time, it is vital that the discussion not devolve into incautious repartee; thus, while decentering the traditional instructor/student hierarchy, I frequently interject critically and use the structure of the lecture to subtly steer the discussion and keep us on course. Such strategies help to foster the difficult balance of lecture and discussion, which thereby enlivens the experience for all involved.

The impromptu setting of a live classroom can be daunting to students for a number of reasons. Some reasons are specific to individual students, such as linguistic challenges, gender differences, shyness, or introversion, while others are difficulties inherent to philosophy itself. In my experience, efforts to *force* discussion are often counterproductive, but I employ specific strategies to involve as many classroom voices as possible. I often ask for volunteers to read key passages as we proceed through the lecture, insisting each time that the volunteer be someone who has not participated in a given week. I have found this strategy to be remarkably successful – once a student has broken the ice, even if only for a recitation of text, she often finds it far less intimidating to voice her opinions at other points. I have also found it helpful to take the class beyond the classroom. I use online blogs as individual journals for students to reflect upon particularly perplexing ideas, and to allow students a safe space to interact without the anxiety of public speaking in a timed setting. In addition, my exams are take-home essays, designed to empower students of various learning aptitudes with the time conducive to careful thought, reconsideration, and presentation. Moreover, in the 'multitude of voices' spirit, I encourage students to engage with their peers in the examination process. In more advanced seminars, we also incorporate the voices of more specialized and diverse secondary literature, culminating in substantive research papers.

In concluding, I would like to briefly address the symbiotic relation between my research and my teaching. My research pursuits form the backbone of who I am as a person and as a teacher. When teaching courses in my areas of specialization, I periodically like to bring in my own current research, explicitly welcoming student input into the process. At times I will seek out students to conduct research with me, like the independent study I recently directed, resulting in a professional publication for the student, on the works of Deleuze and Guattari. But more broadly, that my mind is ever abuzz with new questions also guarantees a constantly fresh perspective on traditional texts I have taught numerous times, which therefore ensures a vibrancy to my pedagogy that is vital to student engagement. Reciprocally, I thrive on the opportunity to teach courses beyond my specialization, precisely because I know that doing so introduces me to new thinkers and new questions, which therefore informs the future path of my research. I never could have anticipated, for instance, how important Spinoza would become for my work. One of the most important elements to successfully inspiring the self-creation of the students is to actively and constantly practice it myself.