Statement Concerning Teaching

Overarching Aims:

Critical thinking is a contact sport. You can't do it without bumping up against ideas, taking hold of them, and testing their mettle. As a result, teaching critical reflection, and thus philosophy, is a matter of getting students to engage actively, and reflectively, with ideas. This doesn't always come easily to them. Too often students enter (and even leave) college having passively accepted, or thoughtlessly rejected, what they've been told by parents, preachers, teachers, and peers. They've abandoned the supposedly childish practice of persistently asking “why?” As a result, they haven't developed the habit of asking what might support, or what might tell against, the various views, commitments, and presuppositions they have inherited. They have let their lives be shaped by ideas without actively trying to determine whether the ideas deserve the influence they (often surreptitiously) have. Moreover, to a large extent, they have failed to appreciate their inheritance; they have failed even to try to understand what is of value in what they've received. As I see it, the challenge, in teaching philosophy, especially at the introductory level, is to get students back to asking “why?” and to give them the tools they need to appreciate, challenge, and evaluate both the ideas they've inherited and those they might yet adopt.

Importantly, critical reflection is primarily constructive rather than destructive. The aim in teaching it is not to undermine conviction but to encourage a deeper and reasoned appreciation of those convictions that reflection leaves intact. To this end, I try to bring students into contact with ideas, arguments, and theories that are clearly worth taking seriously. When teaching my Introduction to Ethics course, I turn to the classics, to books (by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill) that command respect by virtue of their elegance, subtlety, insight, and influence. I then work to help students understand and appreciate the value of what they have read. Along the way, I connect these classics directly to the student’s interests, concerns, and challenges -- making palpable, for instance, the force of Glaucon’s challenge and the plausibility of Socrates’ argument, in Book IX of the Republic) that genuine freedom is not absence of restraint but rule by one’s own reason; conveying the plausibility and practical implications of Aristotle’s theory of character acquisition; exploring the implications of Mill’s arguments for our responses to world hunger and global warming; helping my students appreciate what might be involved in successfully treating someone as an end and not merely as a means, all the while bringing the various ideas to bear on specific cases and questions.

Even as I emphasize the value and relevance of the classics, I bring together positions that appear compelling when considered in isolation but are palpably incompatible (for instance, Mill's Utilitarianism and Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals). I present the various positions as convincingly as I can, concentrating on the arguments and considerations that genuinely recommend each. Yet it doesn't take students long to realize that they can't consistently accept everything they've read and heard. They find themselves with a problem: how can they settle on one or another theory, or combine (in an intellectually satisfying way)
those parts of each that they find persuasive? When I am successful, it is a problem that haunts them.

**Some Methods:**

Coming to grips with this problem is, of course, not a passive enterprise. In lectures, discussions, and writing assignments, I encourage students to face the difficulties and challenges that come with any initially attractive resolution. I regularly introduce some contemporary moral issue, ask students to explain and motivate positions one might reasonably hold concerning them, and then push the students to take and justify a stand that goes beyond what has been covered in the class.

Just which issues I use changes over the years and semester to semester, responding to whatever is in the news or on the students’ minds. In the last three years I have developed a new assignment that has students interview someone at least 20 years their senior about some difficult moral decision that person has had to make -- where what was hard for the person was figuring out what they should do. The students are then charged with writing up a Case Report that makes clear why, for the person in question, the decision was so hard. They are not to take a stand themselves in these reports. Instead, they are challenged to understand, from another person’s point of view, why such a decision would be, at least for that person, so difficult. When I first used this assignment, I thought that at least it would have the benefit of starting a conversation between the students and others that would be beneficial. As things have turned out, the Case Reports are often lovely – compelling, probing, nuanced, and respectful. So now I select a couple of these cases from the class and use them for the final essay assignment, which has the students think through and take a stand themselves on what the morally appropriate reaction to the choice should have been. The final assignment is structured so that they have to engage with the concepts, arguments, and theories that have figured in the course. Moreover, it is designed so that whatever stand the students might take, they must come to grips with the challenges facing any easy resolution. Throughout, the students know well that the choice they are considering is one actually faced by someone known to a classmate. This, I have found, helps them take the choice especially seriously and induces a concern to treat the choice, and the people who might face such a choice, with respect.

The final assignment, like the mid-semester essay assignment, requires students (i) to write and hand-in rough drafts, (ii) to comment in a constructive and substantive way on each others’ work (each student writes a critique of another student's paper), and (iii) to take into account the critiques they've received when writing final versions. They are then graded on both their critiques and final versions, given comments on the arguments (and writing) in those final versions, and offered (for the mid-semester assignment) the opportunity to re-write the paper in light of the feedback they’ve received. The structure of the assignments ensures that the papers are more thoroughly argued, and constructed with more care, than they otherwise would have been. Complementing these essay assignments are some shorter exams that are designed to set the students up for success in writing their essays by forcing careful attention to the aspects of the texts that are directly relevant to the lines of argument and the theories we end up focusing on. Recently I have been working on in-class quick response questions (using Poll-Everywhere) that check their understanding, canvas their opinions in class, and provide on-the-spot examples for the points we are exploring.
The point throughout is to teach students to think clearly, and for themselves, about positions they would otherwise adopt or reject uncritically. In other words, the point is to give students what they need to enjoy intellectual autonomy.

Complementing the major assignments – an essay exam, a mid-semester paper, the case report, and the final paper – are a broad range of assignments throughout the semester. These range from multiple choice exams designed to help students focus on the philosophical arguments in the reading, to in-lecture small-group discussions about central questions, to short written responses to prompts due right before lectures or discussion sections, to Poll Everywhere real-time feedback in lectures. These assignments, not surprisingly, have different specific purposes as the course goes along. They are all designed to hold students responsible for thinking carefully about the material we are reading, discussing and creating, while also providing breaks in pacing, and different opportunities to interact with me, each other, and the material. The mix I use depends very much on the course material and the level of the students in the course. Throughout, though, I aim to develop an intellectually stimulating and challenging environment that helps students appreciate their capacities to think clearly and fruitfully together about deep and important issues.

**Cultivating an Equitable and Inclusive Environment**

There is of course no simple recipe for ensuring that students feel both fairly treated and both welcome to and included in the community of a course. There are, none the less, some key ingredients, including making clear one’s commitment to treating people fairly (by using anonymous grading, offering opportunities for people to learn from and participate in the course in different ways, being accessible to students hoping for help, etc.).

In courses for which I have Teaching Assistants, we meet weekly to answer questions and discuss what should be covered in sections, explore different ways of conveying the material, and opportunities for ensuring that everyone is involved. When grading essay exams and papers we hold grading sessions to be sure that each section is being held to the same standards and that they are being applied equitably to all the students.

Perhaps most important to establishing an equitable and inclusive environment is making it clear that I welcome everyone’s participation and take their ideas, arguments, and concerns seriously.

In a series of videos put together by *UNC’s Center for Faculty Excellence*, I talk a bit about various things I do in my teaching aimed at enriching the experience for my students ([https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTpUWPZQ36OFqnamV-ZQmpRf0FhdvsAA1](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTpUWPZQ36OFqnamV-ZQmpRf0FhdvsAA1)).

**Other Significant Teaching Activities**

I helped establish and have been actively involved with the *National High School Ethics Bowl* (for which the Parr Center for Ethics serves as the National Headquarters. This program extends dramatically the pedagogical work that we do here at UNC, thanks to it reaching over 4000 high school students across the country each year.
Also, I am the director of UNC’s Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Program. In addition to helping to design and run the curriculum, I have worked especially hard to establish a broad range of extra-curricular programing – semester long PPE reading groups (which have students spend a semester working through a book, together, with a discussion leader… over dinner), an active speakers series that regularly attracts 60-80 students on important social and political issues, a public speakers series, and intensive weekend seminars. These efforts reflect my conviction that students benefit tremendously from realizing that their education neither begins nor ends with what happens in the classroom.

Finally, working closely with Michael Vasquez, who is the Philosophy Department’s Outreach Director, I have been teaching Plato’s Republic in the Cabarrus County Juvenile Detention Center. That proved to be tremendously successful, and we are working to expand the reach of the program across the state.