Teaching Statement
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I think that doing philosophy in a classroom means that students need to learn to reason with one another: to state what they think, identify the considerations that support it, hear an objection, and decide whether their view survives. I therefore organize my courses around open philosophical discussion. But the point is not discussion for its own sake. It's to give students repeated practice turning intuitions into arguments and arguments into better questions.

I begin every class with a thought question. The questions are accessible, but they are not easy. For example, suppose you had to choose between being replaced by a replica of yourself that was maximally good at acting in accordance with your cares and having your own capacity to act in accordance with your cares cut in half. Which would you choose? If a stranger offered you an unopened water bottle and five thousand dollars to drink it, would you? Suppose your spouse was everything you had ever wanted, but was also a cookie, such that they shed bite-sized morsels of your favorite cookie instead of hair and skin cells. Would you eat the morsels? Students first write down an answer, then discuss the question in a small group before we address it as a class. Taking the time to write first requires students to form an initial view, while small-group discussion gives them a chance to try it out on others and encounter alternatives. By the time we turn to the whole class, students already have a position, reasons for it, and some sense of where the relevant disagreements may lie. So, within the first ten minutes of class, they've started their philosophical engines and are ready to engage with the material for the day.

Though thought questions are sometimes described as icebreakers, I think that undersells their role. I use students' initial reactions to uncover assumptions and patterns of thought, connect the problem to the assigned reading, and show how an intuition becomes an argument. They're also fun. One Philosophy of Mind student last semester wrote that their roommates always knew when our class had met because the student would come home with "a new thought question to bother them with."

My most recent assignments extend this approach by making philosophical discussion a skill that students practice over time, and a central part of what they learn to do in the course. In my spring 2026 Philosophy of Mind course, the Physicalist Existentialism project I developed asked students what physicalism would imply for mortality, personal identity, free will, and the meaning of life. Students first recorded individual reflections on these questions. They then met for three recorded hour-long group conversations. The instructions were to push each other and to prioritize justification and argument rather than the mere expression of opinions. They were expected to ask one another for reasons and identify gaps in one another's arguments. I emphasized that asking for clarification is not a form of conflict, but a tool for reaching common ground in our understanding of the problem at hand.

My winter 2026 accelerated online Bioethics course used a similar structure in its group assignments. Students first acquired a shared philosophical toolbox through readings and short quizzes about the principles of bioethics. Their groups then annotated readings together and served as ethics boards for difficult cases, recording their entire conversations for a grade. Synchronous groups had to reach and defend a consensus recommendation via recorded video call. In asynchronous groups, one student offered an initial recommendation in a recorded video, and the others developed an alternative or challenged it with a different bioethical principle in videos of their own. This meant that even in an online course students took from home, they got to know their classmates' argumentative styles and were able to engage them in philosophy.

These assignments move from individual reflection, to reasoning with others, to reflection on what the discussion has established. They also address the problem of generative AI without making surveillance the center of the course. We've reached a point where students can outsource term papers, but they can't outsource responding to a particular classmate, answering an objection in real time, or explaining in the moment why a conversation changed their view.

My Spring 2025 course provided a useful counterexample to this approach. Concerned about generative AI, I introduced hard-copy annotation and journal assignments designed to verify that students had completed the work themselves. The assignments failed. While they ensured that students were completing the work on their own, they also made clear that I didn't trust students to complete it using their usual workflows. This strained the classroom dynamic without producing the kind of engagement I wanted. My evaluations also showed that students needed clearer explanations of what assignments required and more timely feedback. I was embarrassed by the results. The lesson I learned is that there's a significant difference between making philosophical work difficult to evade and making it worth doing.

I redesigned my Philosophy of Mind course in spring 2026 around this distinction, but I didn't make the course easier. Instead, following advice from my advisors, I made the material more challenging and cut down on busywork. I explained why the material was difficult, challenged students to push themselves, and gave them more opportunities to work through it together. I replaced assignments centered on monitoring with assignments centered on discussion, and I made their purpose more explicit. The difference was substantial. Ninety-four percent of respondents on my evaluations strongly agreed that the course pushed them to think deeply. Every respondent strongly agreed that I cared about their learning, believed in their potential, and was an instructor they would recommend. Students repeatedly identified the thought questions, small-group work, and class discussions as central to the course. One wrote that they had heard "literally everyone contribute within the first twenty minutes" of class.

These reviews were more positive, but there's still a lot of room to improve future courses. Students gave me good reasons to shorten some readings, vary the membership of discussion groups, and make the standards for group projects more precise. But I think they also support a conclusion that will guide my teaching moving forward: Students are more willing to undertake difficult philosophical work when they understand its point and when the course gives them other people with whom to do it.

In wrapping up, I'd like to say a bit about how my personal background informs my teaching. I did not come from a family familiar with philosophy or academia. When I entered college, many of the conventions governing academic life didn't feel obvious or natural to me. I enjoyed talking one-on-one with professors, for example, but I was always nervous to ask for their time. I also worked throughout my bachelor's degree, which meant that I had to learn how to meet academic expectations while balancing other essential obligations. These experiences shape how I interpret students' behavior. I don't assume that the students who speak most easily, approach an instructor first, or already know what a philosophical paper should look like are the students with the greatest ability or commitment.

However, I do make opportunities to learn these conventions part of the course rather than waiting for students to seek. In several of my courses I ensure that students meet with me at least twice during the semester, usually in connection with a paper or final examination. We discuss their progress, work through feedback, and identify difficulties while there is still time to address them. The structure of class discussion serves a similar purpose of gradually building up their philosophical skills: students write first, discuss their answer in a small group, and then try their hand in plenary discussion. Though there's a bit of hand-holding in these practices, they don't change the standard of what makes a good student. (Students still have to understand an argument and determine what can be said for or against it.) The point is that they shouldn't already need to know how philosophy or academia works in order to have the opportunity to learn how to do this.