

TEACHING STATEMENT

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It is difficult to pen a philosophy for something that I enjoy so thoroughly that it feels... natural. I am fortunate to have taught in several different settings not only in the academy (at Cornell University Prison Education Program, University of Florida, Barnard College, Young Women's Leadership Institute (summer college prep for high-school students) and at Excellence Community Schools (summer college prep at Colgate University for middle and high school students) as well as an ESL instructor, college and graduate school test prep teacher and as a learning consultant in the corporate world. Whether I am lecturing about Hobbes in Pols V1013 Political Theory, encouraging students to contrast Kantian ethics from Kantian anthropology in my Colloquium on Race in Modern Political Thought or debating the "belonging" of unexpected thinkers like Martin Delany or Alain Locke to the western canon, I find that students often treat the normative implications of liberal democratic theory as if they were unproblematically given and thus sustain an orthodox view of 'the political' wherein liberal norms appear as facts and ideals as reality. Often, students derive from "spontaneous" theories about liberalism and democracy a set of expectations involving objectivity and fairness, about what should happen (pedagogically) in the classroom. To grapple with these challenges and to the meet the learning objectives of each of my courses, among other strategies, I treat the classroom as a "learning community," in which my students and I explore the course materials together, requiring that I explicitly link classroom activities and homework to learning objectives and ACTIVELY pay attention to the learning style of every student. I consider myself a guide, responsible for creating and maintaining the conceptual and practical space for the learning community and for making sure that we all are able to articulate, understand, defend and/or attack different interpretations of particular texts.

I. Classroom as Critical Learning Community

I use several "orientation" exercises to create a critical learning community in my classroom to address the challenges mentioned above. The work begins on day one, in which my objectives are 1) that students get to know each other, 2) that we come to some agreement about the how the classroom should function, 3) that we make explicit our assumptions about the topic, 4) that we make explicit our assumptions about several broad topics, including fairness, objectivity and what it means to be democratic that can arise in the classroom setting. I record these assumptions so that we can revisit them throughout the term.

II. Linking Assignments and Classroom Activity to Learning Objectives

I think a lot about what assignments and classroom activities best serve to clarify the assigned material for a given week. Sessions can—and should—serve a number of purposes, including clarifying assigned reading material, debate, relating material to real-world events, writing and presentation preparation etc. It is very easy, however, to allow class sessions to devolve into unstructured conversation that students find frustrating. To avoid this, I make sure to state clearly the purposes of a given section of the course and to vary the methods to achieve my objectives. For example, in *Race and Modern Political Thought*, there is a four-week long section on Kant as a founding philosophical father of race theory. We cover Kant's *Political Writings*, selections from the *Groundwork*, as well as lesser-known texts like the *Anthropology*. For the Kant section, I provided students with a reading guide and though the course is seminar style, I offered short lectures in response to my students' memo presentations. In contrast, during the week where we cover racial discourses, I organized a group exercise called "Is this racist?" [addendum] (If it sounds tongue in cheek, it was. But the exercise led to a long, serious

conversation about race both in popular culture and in our day-to-day exchanges with friends and colleagues).

III. Attending

The best teachers I have seen have good “attending skills.” They pay close attention to their students’ expressions, body language and the quality of their responses to assess the success (or lack thereof) of particular exercises and to find out how well students understand the material. To that end, I also keep an open door. Just as important, I actively work to keep everyone participating. To deal, for example, with the aggressive or overly talkative students, I use a couple of simple strategies. One is to sit or stand next to the student so that my attention seems directed at everyone else. This small action solves a lot of problems. When it doesn’t, I speak to the student privately. One reason that in colloquia, I assign memo presentations, is to ensure that shy students have “safe space” to speak. In lecture courses, where discussion is free form, I make sure to learn all my students’ names. For some students, the problem is not so much shyness, as it is that they prefer not to speak “off the cuff.” Identifying those students and providing them with opportunities to prepare, encourages participation. Finally, to attend to all my students (and myself), I do two things: 1) during a particularly complex activity or tough discussion, I often ask for a volunteer to be “scribe” so that we have detailed notes. I can then e-mail the notes for review or use them to keep a particularly passionate discussion going.