

Teaching Philosophy

Thomas Nadelhoffer

There are as many ways of viewing philosophy as there are philosophers. I happen to approach teaching philosophy along roughly Russellian lines—i.e., treating philosophy as the “realm of liberating doubt.” My ultimate goal is always to use philosophical texts and arguments to induce students to consider the potential fallibility of some of their most cherished views while at the same time encouraging them to understand and appreciate perspectives and ideologies not their own. The purpose of this activity is not to convert them from one way of looking at things to another—although this sometimes occurs—but rather to help them to expand and enrich the views they already have. It is in this respect that my approach to teaching philosophy is Russellian. After all, perhaps the most important role that philosophy plays in a college education is that it provides students with the opportunity to critically examine the grounds of their convictions, prejudices, and beliefs—thereby liberating them from the “arrogant dogmatisms” and “tyrannies of custom” that often stymie both personal growth and interpersonal dialogue. Hence, my job as an educator is to serve as a gadfly to prompt students to think outside of the intellectual boxes that often bind them.

Ten years ago I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to teach full time as a Visiting Instructor at Georgia State University for seven semesters. And while the teaching load was heavy—five courses per semester (three in the summer)—it afforded me with the chance to teach more than 1,400 students in less than three years. At the time, I had just finished my MA and I was unsure whether I wanted to pursue a career in academic philosophy or attend law school. Because my MA thesis advisor thought I would make a good teacher, he encouraged me to apply for the job. Fortunately, they decided to hire me. Shortly thereafter, I realized that I had a genuine passion for teaching. My interest in both teaching and research has carried over to my experiences at Florida State University and Dickinson College, where I have been able to combine passionate teaching with successful scholarship.

My teaching experiences at Georgia State, Florida State, and Dickinson College have reinforced my conviction that philosophy really can open students' minds so long as it is presented in a way that resonates with them. By giving students stimulating topics to think about and discuss, you thereby lay the foundation for a successful and productive learning environment. If students are not engaged with the material it is much harder to get them to critically evaluate the topics under discussion. Hence, in survey courses I think it is particularly important to select subjects that students have already thought about even if they have never had a philosophy course—e.g., the existence of God, the problem of free will, and applied moral and legal issues. In my experience, getting students to appreciate the practical importance of philosophy is a necessary first step in getting them interested in some of the more complicated theoretical issues. Moreover, focusing on the practical importance of philosophy also increases the chances that students will carry some of the important lessons from philosophy with them.

For instance, when teaching the Socratic discussion of our obligation to obey the law in Plato's *Crito*, I always try and relate what Socrates says to the views of other great thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. The goal is to show students why Socrates' discussion of "The Laws" is as salient today as it was two thousand years ago. This not only involves paying close attention to both the letter and spirit of Plato's masterpiece, but also to the historical circumstances surrounding Socrates' execution for "corrupting the youth." By my lights, the *Crito* can serve as an excellent vehicle for prompting students to think more carefully about the limits of political power and criminal sanctions as well as whether we have an obligation to obey laws that we find unjust. I often ask students whether they would have escaped from prison if they were in Socrates' shoes or whether they, too, would have stoically accepted their punishment. Ultimately, in answering this question students are forced to develop their own views about both personal and political virtue—thereby paving the way for their fuller appreciation of the importance of our civil liberties and obligations.

