

Sandmeyer – 1. General Teaching Statement

(Individual PDFs included in this portfolio contain additional pedagogical narratives specific to those materials.)

The primary aim of my philosophy classes is to develop students' abilities to think and express themselves synthetically and creatively. Briefly stated, my classes revolve around three fundamental outcomes: (i) developing the skill of writing clearly and precisely, (ii) developing the skill of reading at a high academic level, and (iii) developing the skill (and the courage) of speaking extemporaneously with eloquence and logical rigor. In the classroom and in my assignments, higher-order evaluative and creative skills are consciously and explicitly built on lower-order skills of recollection and analysis.

Outcomes-Based Student-Centered Learning

This outcomes-based methodology is evinced throughout my teaching portfolio. The Writing Assignments in my PHI516 Phenomenological Directions course show how I teach writing in an advanced class. The Scaffolded Writing Exercises in my PHI100 Introduction to Philosophy course demonstrate how I develop the skill of writing well in lower-level classes. The Guided Reading Exercises in that same PHI100 packet demonstrate how I teach the skill of close reading. And the Discussions Forums in my PHI205 Food Ethics course packet show how I develop skills of precise communication.

During my probationary period, I have focused on teaching 100- to 300-level courses. So, these courses are given prominence in my teaching portfolio. The difference between introductory or reinforcing classes, i.e., 100/200-level and 300-level classes, respectively, and an advanced class is distinguished by the level of sophistication my students obtain in achieving these three primary outcomes. In lower-level classes, I emphasize the use of concrete examples before moving on to more abstract analyses. See the Philosophical Exercise in my PHI100 course as an example. In higher level courses, my lessons accept that students are working at higher levels of abstraction. Typically, these higher-level classes, then, move from abstraction to application. As examples of this, see either the Lessons in my PHI/ENS300 packet or the Assessment materials in my PHI336 course. In summary, introductory students are taught from concrete examples to the abstract analysis of concepts, while in more advanced classes students apply abstract principles and ideas creatively and proficiently in concrete ways. In short, my courses are defined by Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Outcomes, moving from the concrete to the metacognitive as they develop higher order abstract thinking skills.

Creating an Inclusive Learning Community

Teaching during the COVID pandemic has created enormous challenges in the classroom. It is necessary as never before to consider the mental and physical stresses my students are experiencing. However, from my earliest days of teaching I have held that philosophy offers something unique to students. This is a devotion to logic and rigor, and my classes seek to exemplify this devotion. Yet the new normal in which we are all living these days requires that this devotion be tempered by an equal commitment to creating and maintaining an inclusive learning community in the classroom. A class that builds strong communities of active learners into its structure not only achieves the highest outcomes it sets for itself but also enhances the mental and physical health of its students so necessary to meeting those outcomes.

I expend substantial effort in my classes working to achieve this very goal. Indeed, over the years I have refined how I promote and build into my curriculum structures that undergird active learning communities. The earliest example of this is in my ENS400 Capstone documents, particularly the Group Project materials. These Group Projects were modeled on traditional group

work rubrics. That is, students were put into groups. The groups completed tasks, and individuals earned the grade obtained by the group. Evaluative rubrics and self & peer evaluation forms attempted were introduced to mitigate a problem common to this model, i.e., the problem of unequal work. This more traditional group model establishes group work as essentially a distinct and partial element of the total class structure. I have since changed completely the pedagogy of group work in my classroom. Group work is now a fundamental part of almost all my classes.

This transformation began during the height of the lockdown when students were isolating away from campus and classes were entirely online. See my PHI/ENS300 class, particularly the Discussion Forums and Assessment materials, for a demonstration of the systems I created to build active and inclusive learning communities into that class. Here groups were formed at the start of the semester, and students worked in these groups over the course of the whole term. When classes returned to an in-person modality, I retained this model. This is evident in the Student Work found in my PHI205 Food Ethics course, specifically in Discussion Forum on the concept and morality of food insecurity. As a rule, I now subdivide my class rosters in the first two weeks of the semester into groups containing anywhere between five to seven students. The students remain within their same groups throughout the entire semester. So, rather than thinking of group work as a separate element of the class, the class, itself, is structured around these learning communities. Online discussion forums, which are integrated into the assignments given over the semester, create natural pods of conviviality among the students. By the end of term, students learn almost as much from their peers as they do from me. This way of structuring my classes advances the disciplinary outcomes of the class, to be sure. But as important as these outcomes are, the consistent and integrated group work built into the structure of my classes fosters a communal fabric in the class whose value transcends that of any individual achievement. The impact of this innovation on my students has been marked and positive.

Philosophy in an Interdisciplinary Key

Given the complexity of problems confronting the world today, it has never been more important to study philosophy in an interdisciplinary key. In my own work, I believe the humanities, and particularly philosophy as a core humanities discipline, must engage the social and environmental issues most threateningly confronting us as citizens and as a species. While I in the classroom may be able only inadequately to redress the host of divisions eroding our social fabric, I can in my classes teach my students the skills by which to understand each other, skills to evaluate the rational justifications underlying coherently held beliefs, and the grounds for respecting others as persons having intrinsic value. Philosophy as I teach it has an essential role to play both in conceptualizing the idea of community and of engaging diverse communities of interests and methodologies. My work as a philosopher aims to evince and, in this ethos, cultivate values fundamental to our democracy. Indeed, in the transdisciplinary scope of my work as a philosopher, the classroom has a preeminent role in this mission. This is evidenced in all my ethics classes. In my ethics work, my pedagogy aims to build a robust understanding of the nature of critical civic engagement and to cultivate a clear grasp of the social justice issues defining modern environmentalism. The pursuit of truth, I hold, is central to the philosophical endeavor, as I demonstrate in my PHI100 class. As a humanist and philosopher working at the intersection of diverse disciplines, the skills I teach provide students the means, themselves, to think critically and understandingly about the nature of thinking, about the distribution of goods and harms in our society, and about the responsibilities entailed by our freedom as citizens of the United States.