

As an instructor of philosophy, I aim for my students to (1) develop skills that contribute to their professional success and development, (2) expand their imaginations so that they can anticipate alternative possibilities and, therefore, anticipate alternative solutions, (3) foster systematic critical thinking, so they can effectively determine the best solutions or most plausible positions, and (4) appreciate the philosophical underpinnings of Western democratic institutions and norms that greatly influence our personal lives. Below, I want to give you a sense of how these four aims guide my instruction, assessment, and course content. Since points (1), (2), and (3) are interrelated, I will discuss them first. Then I will discuss point (4). But I also want to give you a sense of how concerns of student success guide my teaching style. So, I will end by discussing methods I use to achieve student success.

Towards Professional Success, Expanded Imaginations, and Critical Thinking

The public attitude towards the study of philosophy – and the liberal arts more generally – is that it is a waste of time and money. The evidence shows quite the contrary. Employers value effective written communication, ethical decision making, solving problems with people whose views differ from their own, and critical thinking.¹ As such, the study of philosophy stands to prepare students for success in their professional lives, and the available metrics show this to be the case.²

I aim to facilitate students' written communication by adopting new assessment strategies. Instead of relying on essay tests over large quantities of materials (e.g. mid-terms and finals), I am shifting towards tightly focused quizzes and multiple paper assignments. In writing multiple papers, students have the chance to use my feedback to improve their writing as the semester goes on.

In order to develop their ethical decision making, I use my *Introduction to Philosophy* course as a chance to reveal the serious theoretical difficulties that moral relativism, subjectivism, and nihilism face – stances I find that many students are attracted to. At the same time, I expose students to versions of the major objective moral theories, discuss how they are applied in contemporary society, and encourage them to think deeply about how philosophers have attempted to ground their respective theories. By thinking about the philosophical grounds of moral theories, students are better able to appreciate the legitimacy, or illegitimacy, of certain societal norms, and they become equipped with the general sense of overarching moral principles, which can then be applied in specific cases.

A general theme in the history of philosophy is challenging one's own preconceptions and looking at the world in a new light. By challenging students' preconceived opinions in class discussions, and offering alternative possibilities, I encourage open-mindedness and epistemic humility, which, in turn, promotes the ability to work with others who have different views.

Perhaps most notably, the central methodology of good philosophy is truth-preserving logical argumentation, which, itself, is a central component to critical thinking. Accordingly, I devote a significant amount of class time to the logical analysis of the key arguments in play, asking students to determine whether they think the premises are true and whether they think the arguments are valid or strong. Moreover, the papers I assign either require the students to provide an argumentative analysis of an argument or require the students to construct an argument.

¹ See <https://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research/2015-survey-falling-short>

² See <http://dailynous.com/value-of-philosophy/charts-and-graphs/>

Towards Political Agency and Stewardship

The value of philosophy is not to be found only in the personal and professional development of students, but also in their development as political agents. Human beings are temporary beings thrust in the middle of history. As such, it is easy for students to take Western institutions and Western values for granted, to assume that they do not need to look after these institutions or seek their improvement, and to believe that the way of life they have come to enjoy will continue inevitably. Because Western liberal democracies have made life better for humanity, and because Western liberal democracies can still be improved upon, it is important for students to be aware of the benefits liberal democracies have afforded them, to understand that these institutions require care, and to understand that they can be improved.

In order to encourage students to take their political agency seriously, I point out that the way of life they have been afforded by liberal democracies had to be argued for. The way of life they take for granted was not obvious to our ancestors; and so, its legitimacy had to be grounded. Review of the arguments for our way of life reveals to students the substantive reasons in favor of Western institutions, thereby encouraging students to care for these institutions and seek their improvement. I try to make this all the more pressing to them by pointing out that anti-democratic forces exist and will likely continue to exist.

Towards Student Success

Students have the right to expect that faculty members aim for their academic success and act as team members and valuable resources facilitating their success. One challenge to this is getting students to see you, the instructor or professor, as an active team member beyond the classroom. I employ several strategies to overcome this challenge. First, I consciously present myself as someone who is approachable. I make myself approachable by playing popular music, or music I personally like, before class starts, as well as making small talk with students. If a lighthearted joke occurs to me during class, I sometimes divulge it. In general, I project an easygoing attitude. Second, I try to communicate a personal investment in them as students. I learn each of their first names at the beginning of the semester. I make a point to reach out both to students who are excelling and to students who are underperforming. For students who excel, I encourage them to seriously consider pursuing philosophy or, at least, to think about pursuing graduate school in their chosen interest. For students who underperform, I work with them to determine the cause and brainstorm on possible solutions.

Another challenge is getting students to see what academic success involves, as it involves more than merely earning a degree. It involves the acquisition and development of intellectual tools, tools that will certainly be useful in their professional lives, but that will also be useful in their personal and civic lives. Academic success involves transforming the student into better citizens of the world, through challenging their preconceptions, exposing them to new and different ideas, and by enabling them to think carefully through difficult and subtle societal problems and problems endemic to the human condition. I encourage students to view academic success in this broader sense by asking them to think of themselves as projects that can be improved, by explicitly informing them of the skills an assignment is aimed at developing, and by encouraging the application of these skills to difficult, controversial problems.