

Teaching Statement – Julia Netter

I believe that teaching philosophy well requires encouraging students to think creatively and precisely, as well as helping them learn to provide, and engage with, critical feedback.

Creativity and precision are key to identifying philosophical questions and to evaluating philosophical positions that students confront. Teaching in the Oxford tutorial system, I turned its weekly student essays into an activity promoting both. While many instructors set the kind of questions that students are likely to encounter in their exams, I always require students to choose their own questions to answer. In the beginning, they usually struggle to find questions that lend themselves to substantive philosophical argument, and instead choose broad, descriptive questions. I provide feedback on the questions, but also occasionally allow students to experience first-hand how difficult it is to make a rigorous argument in response to an ill-specified question. This experience teaches students how to identify interesting, precise philosophical puzzles.

When I teach in class and provide feedback on students' writing, I use the mantra of "*answer the question*" to help students acquire habits of precision. First, I prompt them to *answer* the question instead of simply summarizing rival approaches, conflicting arguments, or potential objections that are relevant. Instead, students should use these to aid their own judgments on the question at hand. Second, I emphasize that students must answer the *question*, rather than mistake it for a cue to talk about the topic at large. Finally, I encourage students answer *the* question, that is, the question they chose, rather than a related one. This easy-to-remember mantra guides them in developing arguments that are precise and to the point.

In class, I give students concrete strategies that promote creative thinking. I guide them to pay attention to the *structure* of the arguments in the texts we focus on, i.e., their key claims and their underlying assumptions. If students are unconvinced, I ask "what specific element in this list leaves you puzzled and under which circumstances could it lend support to the argument?", and if they are convinced, I prompt them to ask "which parts of the argument seal the deal, and what would it take to challenge them?". I demonstrate this technique myself early on, detailing how I go about analyzing an example text. In future classes I teach, I plan to experiment with formalizing this approach. I will provide students with prepared (but expandable) "mindmaps" of questions they may ask to analyze a philosophical argument, as well as terms that prompt them to view the argument from new angles. For a class on contemporary political philosophy, for example, such a "mindmap" might contain terms for different values (e.g., liberty, equality, community) and perspectives (e.g., ideal theory, feminism), and other words that might trigger an association leading to an idea. These mindmaps conceptually externalize our mental state, prompting new ideas and connections. They do not constrain discussion, but rather help students identify angles that an argument may not yet cover. Even though creativity and precision may appear to be distinct learning goals, this technique jointly promotes both.

It is important to me that students relate the philosophical ideas they encounter in often abstract descriptions or somewhat contrived examples in class to real-world situations. I ask students to be on the lookout for philosophical questions and problems in their daily lives that allow them to apply the concepts from class and think beyond them. If the current topic is liberty, I encourage students to look for examples in popular culture that put liberty in conflict with other values, or where different interpretations of liberty are at work. For example, New Hampshire's "Live free or die" license plate may raise questions about the value of liberty: could an unfree life be worth living? Does the license plate espouse a particular conception of liberty? By telling students to put on their philosopher's glasses in everyday life with a specific target, I promote their creativity in identifying philosophical questions, independent of the texts they read in class and their way of framing problems.

Beyond this, a cycle of writing, reading, offering and receiving criticism is essential to students' growth as philosophers, as it helps engender creative thinking, habits of precision, and a culture of mutual feedback. Oxford's small-group teaching allows this cycle to play out between a tutor and 2–3 students on a weekly

basis, but replicating it in a larger class setting can be challenging. I plan to experiment with technology to create a similar experience even for larger groups. I will ask students to choose their own questions and upload their writing assignments to an online review system. Using this system, I will assign each (anonymized) submission to another student to comment on, and also provide feedback myself. This gives students the opportunity to offer feedback on their peers' writing, but also supplies them with individualized feedback on their own. Platforms for this purpose (e.g., conference review systems like HotCRP or EasyChair) are widely available, free, and straightforward to use, and make it easy for me to ensure that the peer feedback remains civil. I will draw on the collected material to select examples of good writing and critique for in-class discussion, and use them to jump-start further debate on the topic material, relying on the creativity-promoting techniques outlined before. This setup prepares students for the research seminars and review cycles of academic philosophy, but also teaches a culture of constructive criticism that helps them develop as writers and learn from each other.

In summary, I enjoy helping students become independent, creative thinkers who can develop precise and structured arguments when engaging with other philosophers' work. My teaching philosophy centers around feedback cycles based on the students' own work, and provides systematic aids to further develop precision and creativity in their thought processes.